The Endless Knot: Twenty-Two Turns in Search of a Bitter End

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Turn 1

Forty years spent in the wilderness made Jim Gleitz question his sanity. He understood himself as having been wronged by forces beyond his understanding. He was suffering a tribulation, he thought. The punishment in his view did not fit the crime.

He came upon Hosea Miller's cabin, the object of his search, entirely by accident. It was there in a thicket of trees near the Maine-Canada border. He smashed the window to the front door and invited himself in. Then he sat at Hosea's kitchen table and composed a psalm:

I will curse you, the Lord who is
the oppressor of this world;
I will curse your name for ever and
ever.
Every day I will curse you
and defile your name for all time.

Soon he thought what next.

Turn 2

Absinthe of various stripes imported from Germany seemed the entire contents of the cabin's larder.

This included ordinary tap water. The spigot in the kitchen sink might as well have been ornamental for all the use it provided. Hosea Miller must have had a source for water somewhere, Jim Gleitz thought. If only because the strong anise-flavored drink couldn't be tolerated undiluted. He thought eventually it would become less a pleasure for a user than an exotic form of self-flagellation. Thus, maybe the absinthe was all for show. Or maybe it was for expected guests such as Gleitz who wished to brace himself prior to meeting the cabin's owner.

The absinthe bottles possessed the shape of a skull. The clear glass revealed the green liqueur underneath.

"You think I'm a fucking lush son, but not hardly," Gleitz said to an imaginary presence as he pulled the cork out of one skull with his teeth. He thought he would sit and take pulls from the skull top until Hosea Miller appeared. He didn't give a fuck about proper dilution or basic civility. He had had it for the most part with the game of cat-and-mouse. Forty years in the wilderness, bub, was no

light sentence to endure. He thought none of it was his fault. He had made various poor decisions, certainly. These enabled suffering without justifying it. He didn't, for example, believe in Westing by sextant and musket. He wanted to prove his own divinity through simple happenstance (i.e., the invisible Hand of the Lord). He wanted to have walked into Hosea's cabin and recalled that it was God's hand that drove him there.

When it didn't happen, he was loath to think it was his fault. He thought maybe he was stricken by fate. This didn't mean God had abandoned him. Merely, Gleitz was hated by Him. Different circumstance altogether. One state implied being overlooked while the other implied condemnation. Jim Gleitz was the sort who would rather be condemned than be overlooked.

Turn 3

Forty years ago, he had wanted to rendezvous with Hosea Miller. This was to receive instructions concerning his latest mission.

Gleitz was, you see, a sort of spiritual mercenary-for-hire. He worked in places other men did not. Merely, because they were unaware of these places. Once situated, Gleitz was free to act violently as the occasion called for. This was because he too had been rendered invisible by being there. On such occasions, he was less of an undercover cop than a hitman. Through violent conduct he satisfied the wishes of his clients.

But he was hard to hire as he had neither a fixed address nor access to modern forms of communication.

Jim Gleitz above all was a soul diver.

The world was rife with nightmares and septic visions, OK? And Gleitz was the only one capable of performing corrective measures on it. He was imperious and distant and didn't give a fuck. This was why he supposed he was so good at what he did. He was a myrmecologist in a world of ants. He had this weird ability to abstract, to ignore the queen's chemical call. He probably wasn't human deep down. He thought he was the product of a mysterious angel/computer coupling somewhere in

the distant cosmos. A true fuck fest this coupling, likely. It had taken place on the event horizon of a supermassive black hole.

On Andromeda galaxy’s supermassive blackhole event horizon perhaps. Which was (1.1–2.3) × 108 (110-230 million) M☉ in size. The supermassive black hole in the Milky Way galaxy, Sagittarius A*, is 4.1 million M☉ in size. While the length of a praying mantis’ arms was exactly 1.2 times the length of its thorax.

Turn 4

They, the angel and computer, would fuck and dance on the bands of Hawking Radiation being created on the event horizon's surface.

"*We are merely the stars' tennis-balls, struck and banded whichever way pleases them*," Jim Gleitz said to himself, repeating for the umpteenth time his favorite John Webster quote. The German absinthe was having an unexpectedly rapid effect on him. Soon he was flying, in love not with the world but rather his distorted vision of the world. He never knew the world as intimately as a self-described soul diver should. He tended to sentimentalize it. He tended to overlook its mechanistic nature and assume it was capable of moral judgments for and against the microorganisms that dwelt in its gut.

John Webster had been one such microorganism. One day he had disappeared off the streets of Elizabethan London. For good. Neither hide nor hair was ever to be reclaimed by investigators (which were precious few and indifferent to their tasks, admittedly. Webster was a mere playwright, not a poet, not an alchemist, hardly a soldier. Perhaps a drunken sojourn had found him in critical debt with the roiling Thames. More likely, he had been snatched by the forces of **EVULT**, a mendacious race

from another dimension, for reasons that did not translate to ordinary human discourse. Witnesses to the kidnapping testified that Webster shimmered prior to vanishing into thin air. Perhaps he was still alive, chained to a bone pillar and forced to compose variations on *The Duchess of Malfi* until Kingdom Come. Perhaps he was some place even worse than this).

Gleitz thought if he ever ran into John Webster in one of his absinthe-fueled sojourns, he would convert to Catholicism on the spot then rise to the rank of Cardinal if only to facilitate a papal indulgence. This would be granted to Webster, giving him eternal life in heaven regardless of his sin of this world.

"*Eagles commonly fly alone. There are crows, daws, and starlings that flock together*," Gleitz said then momentarily slipped from the kitchen chair, righted himself, then decided to trash Hosea Miller's cabin. He had thus far found the place an enormous disappointment. No morsel of guidance had been available for his delectation. He was starting to think he had been ripped off. That he had been played for a motherfucking fool.

Turn 5: In Service of a Sheet Bend

He needed a cudgel to perform the trick properly. So, he made one out of a table leg. He started first on the non-functioning kitchen sink. Once this malfunctioning device was properly detached, he stared at the jet of water emerging from the spigot and wondered if he had overreacted.

He walked over to the spigot and washed his face. Then he walked back to the table and found the absinthe bottle resting next to an upturned leg. He took three large pulls of the green liquid floating inside it and knelt in a kitchen corner. He felt certain that this was it, that he had overdone it with the strong drink. He would wind up like John Bonham in the back of his hot rod after a night of carousing. Choking on his own vomit, that is. Too drunk just then to judge properly, he felt this jumping off point into nothingness to be as good as any. He was mildly upset by the day's anti-climactic events. He thought his life path had formed itself into a circle. Everything was beside the point. Past was future. And all concepts were meaningless.

He thought himself relieved of the holy duty to Find Out. And once this happened, a man was as

good as dead. This very well could have been a deception instigated at the behest of the Green Fairy. Gleitz was badly in need of strong coffee. But he didn’t think he would make it to another sober moment. Even now he could feel the vomit rising. He thought he should elevate his head so when it came up it would slide back down, and he wouldn’t asphyxiate.

Always more intuitive than analytical, Gleitz found himself momentarily at a loss about how to move. Up was down for him just then. He found he couldn’t formulate a plan of attack. A former grade schoolteacher of his blamed such a cognitive deficiency on ADD. But this was what they always claimed of rambunctious boys. The truth was he had to feel his body to move it. But presently his senses were dulled to a flat edge.

Turn 6

When Gleitz discovered Hosea Miller, Hosea and his un-spliced spacetime worm were standing above him, wondering aloud after the puddle of vomit on his kitchen floor.

“Was it that hard to wait?” Hosea, one of the Hosea’s, asked Gleitz as he watched him struggle to rise. The absinthe skull was in a dozen pieces by the green tinted vomit puddle which had formed near a growing water puddle. This had emanated from the broken sink in a corner. Several Hoseas in the worm’s thorax wondered what the fuck when beholding the sight (somehow) of a dissipated Gleitz in the cabin’s corner. They thought he was far more professional than this, having arrived with sterling references from this dimension (and several others). They thought of him as a scholar of spiritual decay (which was a physical decay owing to the soul’s illusory nature, a mere spackling together of fear, limitation, and perception that somehow was assumed as a precious substance by many). They assumed Gleitz knew the minor difference between kundalini and a prolapsed rectum. They assumed he could speak eloquently on the subject if prompted to.

What had happened to Hosea Miller to have had his spacetime worm be revealed above the lip of

common perception was beyond the scope of this narrative. Perhaps he had angered some malevolent trans-dimensional being and this was his punishment. He was self-aware of his foibles, future events, and inadequacies up to the worm's head. Fucking awful it must have been for those Hoseas near the tail. Gleitz thought he would kill himself if he had been forced to change places with them. All his future selves would be laid out for him to contemplate. But, on the other hand, the decision-making process of such a creature must have been severely limited. If functioning at all.

Gleitz' rationalization, lame though it might be, was that he too was a creature with a deep concept of the past and present simultaneously.

"To me," he told the Hoseas, "a second and half could be a dozen years. And there's the fact that all you seemed to have to offer a guest is hard liquor. So.."

He groggily rose and surmised the room. It seemed to have changed suddenly in the few hours. The world was going to hell in a handbasket rapidly because of this protean attribute. Gleitz believed he had located the cause of such rapid change as **EVULT** attempting to drive men mad. Visions like Hosea were utterly commonplace in such a circumstance. Unlike his fellow humans, Jim Gleitz knew enough to inquire after the nature of the real. He knew attempting to maintain a fixed point on shifting sands was disastrous for a man's sanity. Going crazy was exactly what **EVULT** wanted you to do. Men wanted their God back. The old three-O God, that is, with the unblinking eye. Where the structure of the universe was neither holographic nor transitory. A craven impulse, Gleitz thought, usually expressed in craven ways.

Now.

“What is this all about,” Gleitz asked the Hosea Millers, fixated on one segment within the shifting structure. This was Hosea Miller at age fourteen just after discovering the holy glory of masturbation. This Hosea’s parents were on vacation, and he had not left his bedroom all day. An execrable vision in whitey-tighties he was. But at least in this incarnation he was temporarily unencumbered by lust’s hellhound. And he was sated as much as any callow youth could be. He believed he had hit on an essential universal secret.

As an answer, a Hosea segment near the worm’s head began to voice incantations intended as heresy unto the Gods of an unfounded religion.

“We plant the rye by daylight, the sorghum in the sun’s reflection off the moon,” this Hosea segment said to Gleitz, meaning perhaps something metaphorical by it. If Gleitz wanted poetry as a response, he should have ventured to Ted and Sylvia’s cabin somewhere on the Yorkshire moors. He told the collective worm the same. He then picked up a glass shard from the broken absinthe bottle.

“This can be easy or this can be hard,” he said to the Hosea collective. But, let’s face it, none of this was being recorded for posterity. A soul diver, Gleitz didn’t cater to the exact lingo he used in each situation. He assumed it didn’t matter. Language was a cudgel wielded against a given interlocuter’s spirit. Its syntax and aesthetic qualities were irrelevant. It simply needed to get the job done. And a man knew that it got the job done by the amount blood pouring from his interlocuter’s orifices.

He wanted to get on with this thing, in other words. The prospect of staying here indefinitely swilling vile wormwood potions nauseated him deeply. He had never drunk absinthe. And now that he had he was r**EVULT**ed by its simple presence.

Vaguely he thought these bottles were an attempt at mindfuck on the part of some Hosea Miller. This was a drink for fools and madmen merely. And he felt somehow it would be weeks before he was free of its effects.

Seeing the spacetime worm recoil, Gleitz put the glass shard down.

“It’s nothing personal,” he told the worm having resolved to address the lead segment alone. Easier conceptualized than done this, as every so often a new section would emerge from the oozing black liniment that seemed to act as a necessary grease between worm segments. It shielded each segment from the other’s direct presence. Also, it seemed to act as a nutrient for segments future and past, preserving hope and memory which were mutually antipathic and contradictory.

Gleitz thought maybe if he talked sense to the worm, the worm might eventually reciprocate. No kidding, he wanted to get the hell out of here, beat it into the illimitable woods he had just emerged from after decades of wandering. He felt another licorice-flavored belch building deep inside. He needed fresh air, pure spring water, and, maybe a little later, Vitamin C to take the edge off. Now he realized why the absinthe was bottled in skulls. He thought it was a gimmick, but it turned out to be a warning.

The segment’s momentary head was a wizened-looking Hosea, jaybird naked, and covered stem to stern with blue-black tattoos the same color as a heroin bruise. These were variations of the eight auspicious symbols of the Ashtamangala. They were meant to summon something likely. Or to exorcise something. Looking at this Hosea segment with the glassy eyes and white beard, Gleitz likely didn’t know which. Three more worm segments at

minimum would have to grow before he would know for sure.

But this incarnation of him was at least earnest-looking.

“Do you want me to leave?” Gleitz asked the earnest-looking Hosea eyeing-the cabin door.

Because of his condition, Hosea Miller had a hard time putting thoughts into words.

Rather, he gestured with several sets of vestigial arms towards the refrigerator in the corner. This appliance had passed unexplored by Gleitz owing to that which he assumed to dwell inside (absinthe). Or maybe something equally r**EVULT**ing, given the delicacy of his constitution just then. Perhaps some neglected fruit, for example, gone moldy from age. If it was there, Gleitz would take one look at it and wretch. The handle on the refrigerator door was rusty. Such a detail didn’t bode well for the freshness of that which dwelt inside.

But this was where Hosea had wanted Gleitz to look.

Inside the humming fridge there was a single wire shelf.

“It’s still beating,” he said of the heart. It was the shape of a heart-shaped box of candy.

Gleitz walked over and placed the heart’s bloody exterior on the linoleum counter. As he did, its beating briefly assumed a more staccato rhythm.

He turned to the Hosea worm that had lately grown a new segment. This was a new somber Hosea altogether with the tats and the wild gray hair covered by a monk’s robe. He had found religion at an old age.

“You’re asking me to find the key,” Gleitz told him. “Yes,” the worm said. “It’s all fairly routine stuff for me. This bloody muscle that keeps on keeping on until it can be opened. Life is pain. We all know this. Somebody to whom the heart belongs

wants the pain to stop. And it can be assumed (but not yet proven) there's a connection between these states, that the secrets contained within are the cause of the exterior pain. The organ needs to be flung open to be spread wide upon its brass hinges (which I confess to you, now, I am not able to locate) and fumigated. An obvious enough metaphor presented as sacred truth," Gleitz said to the Hoseas and began to feel around the slippery folds of the heart-shaped heart. He was looking for an old-fashioned keyhole. As he worked, his hands became progressively bloodier up to the point that he had lost track of them visually. He seemed to have disappeared up to the wrists. There was an illusion created that he, Jim Gleitz, was inside the heart already palpating its chambers and walls. He was ensconced to such a degree he felt that his fingers had become scalpels. He felt he had done irreparable damage to the heart before he had the chance to lawyer on its behalf.

The heart's keyhole was just under the fleshy flap that covered the left ventricle. It was in a depression where the great cardiac vein ought to have been.

"About a third of a half-inch long from top to bottom," Gleitz said to a po-faced Hosea Miller in the shadow of his monk's robe. "I'm recalling in my mind's eye what the key that fits it looks like. I'm looking for the escutcheon but it's not there.," he said. "It's a typical keyway for a warded lock if ever I've felt one," he said. "Something suitably symbolic, therefore. The key in question is a skeleton key. A brass job from the nineteenth century. You know what it looks like with just the brief description I've offered."

According to Gleitz, this case's successful conclusion was a snap. Merely, it involved keeping the heart beating out in the open and awaiting its

owner’s return. Once he came for it, Gleitz’ plan involved beating him senseless and taking the key off him (or her).

“If I were you,” he said to the Hosea collective, “I wouldn’t have waited for the likes of me to show up. You could have solved the case yourself,” he said. “The key to a person’s heart rests entirely with the person the heart beats for,” he said. “I mean,” he said, “QED. There’s no reason to overthink it. I mean, I’m the best obviously at what I do. But you don’t need a math genius to do your taxes. It’s wasteful and silly. And based on all that I’ve heard about you, I frankly expected better.”

Gleitz removed his bloody hands from the beating organ and held them up for inspection in the room’s poor light.

‘Well, what next sir?” he said. “Do you have a bed for me? Just for the night,” he said. “Eventually it will be day once more. And then. And then you know we can spring our little trap.”

The Hosea worm shifted and roiled in front of Gleitz as if having swallowed a dead bee and was attempting through peristalsis to force into its nether gut.

It was then that Gleitz made up his mind about what to do to the vision in front of him. In the middle of the night, he would come for it with the sharpened glass. And he would slice each segment from the whole, as salami through a meat cutter.

He was a soul diver and intent on doing the Lord’s work. He thought himself justified, therefore, at any sort of malfeasance. It was all for the greater glory of God.

Turn 7

So began Jim Gleitz' Dark Night of the Soul. It was just after his Long Day's Journey into Night.

"Hold fucking still! Motherfucker! Abomination!" Gleitz said to Hosea Miller, the totality of him anyway, and sawed at the thin membrane that kept two of the segments together. In retrospect, he should have used a proper cutting implement such a surgical scalpel for the operation as the end of the glass shard was doing nearly as much damage to his palm as the creature in front of him. It was too sharp and too multi-faceted likely to be used effectively as a saw. The moment had failed Gleitz. Now he was amid his labors. He had cut three Hosea sections from the worm proper. He was in the midst of cutting the fourth, but the laceration on his palms were causing second thoughts. It felt like he had actually severed a nerve in one of them because of the numbness therein. He likely needed medical attention. He needed to have his hands bandaged after antibiotics of some type were applied to the fresh wounds.

The worm was now in several pieces, but all were still growing. This lent a type a Sisyphean aspect to Gleitz' labors.

"I mean how can you fucking stand it," Gleitz said to one segment, a whole Hosea, writhing on the

kitchen floor. This was Hosea Miller at seventeen dressed in a velveteen tux while headed to the senior prom. The boutonniere showed no signs of wilting despite his recent trauma. Newly liberated of past and future, the segment had encountered a blissful state of being. This had more to do with his newly amputated status than his having to remain at prom forever. He was dying but it didn't matter anymore. As every moment, if separated from before and after, would register as infinite. Lucky him. But, on the other hand, he was disgusting as the day was long.

Doused in the tar black liniment and the pierced membrane that had begun to decay into gray goo around the severed Hosea, Gleitz himself had turned disgusting. The viscous substance found its way into his pores as well as the lacerations on his palms. Of some malign origin, it had started of late to shut down his tetrahedron pituitary, that fourth dimensional lobe of the pituitary gland that all humans were in possession of. This was the lobe that governed equipoise while navigating the spacetime worm. With its inhibition, the past and future became tangible to an observer. Confusion unto madness set into an ordinary person's brain. It was poison of a sort that expanded consciousness. When confronted with truth, the soul was willing, but the brain r**EVULT**ed. Thus, the necessary development of the tetrahedron pituitary. Before its having evolved, all men were insane. Afterwards men were merely benighted and loathsome but freed from madness. Which, according to a prevailing spiritual theory, was all that really mattered.

Gleitz was sick already but so high on his efforts at Hosea-cide that he hadn't realized how compromised he was.

“Wait,” he said to Hosea Prom tux and walked toward the sink with the broken spigot. The best course would have been for him to take off all his clothes and bathe in the outflow. But unaware of the danger he was in, he contented himself washing out his lacerations and taking any number of water gulps. Trying to avoid the gray goo as much he could, he began to tear off strips of the velveteen tux to use as a bandage. This included the boutonniere and the white rose therein. Having discarded it into the goo, Gleitz watched with dispassion as the flower immediately grew roots into the floor and sprouted leaves. These leaves then sprouted new roses quickly.

Then the roses wilted, and the plant died. It decayed into a biologic mass which sprouted a fern which was devoured by fire ants. The ants built a hill that a meerkat troop raided using prehensile fingers. From meerkat to *homo heidelbergensis*, a familiar and dreary evolutionary progression was witnessed. And from *homo heidelbergensis* sprouted a series of appalling human iterations, culminating in one Bobby McCann, a Brylcreemed interpreter of the Great American Songbook. He was doing his thing in a piano bar in Hackensack, NJ. And within his lapel buttonhole, not surprisingly, emerged a white rose.

This all took place in five seconds. To judge only by the fluidity of his movements, Gleitz was undisturbed. He barely registered anything as off-putting or weird. Among all men he was uniquely placed to surf the absurdities of boundless spacetime. He had long denied the primacy of time and place. Unlike Hosea Miller, he knew himself as a bounded entity. The difference was he refused to elevate the attribute as defining. He knew at some point he would be liberated of time and place. And, therefore, of personhood altogether. He was a soul

diver, above all. He lusted after interiority. To him, objective reality was just a way station between dreams. He understood reality's contingent nature far better than others of his tragic phenotype. He understood reality was rife with fissures and fistulae. There were so many imperfections to it when viewed from up close that it was logical to prefer the perfection of certain dreamscapes to it. The problem was that so many humans never viewed it from up close. They were ignoramuses, put plainly. They were residents of dreams that they saw as real. That was the difference between them and Jim Gleitz, the main difference anyway. Gleitz was a nihilist, but they were merely stupid. There was nothing enlightened to the choices they made. Indeed, they had no philosophical orientation at all.

Gleitz could never be driven crazy as he had willfully and painstakingly rejected the concept of sanity. He had achieved satori, broken free of the matrix. He had witnessed the mountebank obscenities **EVULT** had presented and scoffed. He thought they were mildly interesting, especially the Bobby McCann part. He liked Bobby's sad-sack face made ruddy with drink and narcotics. He liked his slow tempo version of Cole Porter's *What is This Thing Called Love* most of all. Bobby rung the emotion out of that song as skillfully as Ol' Blue Eyes, surely. His limitations as a singer only heightened the emotional power of the lyric's reading, at least in Gleitz' humble opinion:

I was a humdrum person/
Leading a life apart/
When love flew in through my window wide/
And quickened my hum-drum heart/
Love flew in through my window/
I was so happy then/
But after love had stayed a little while/

Love flew out again

Bobby McCann’s voice was shot due to a three pack a day cigarette habit and a hundred milligram heroin habit that ate at his dental work and therefore the acuity of his tongue placement against the palate. But he had a way with a song, especially *that* song. Its performance wouldn’t let go of Gleitz. Likely all Bobby needed was better management to make it, to move across the Hudson River and play the swanky joints in midtown. Gleitz thought if he ever laid eyes on Bobby again, he would offer his services towards this end. He thought he would make a good talent manager. He assumed himself capable of much duplicity, ball-busting for a negotiated rate, and general shmuck decorum that (he believed) constituted talent management’s backbone. He’d sober Bobby up then whore him out. Bobby’d die miserable, but well known. Which, let’s face it, was the best outcome possible in the Faustian bargain of fame. Gleitz assumed Bobby knew the rules in advance. He assumed he knew happiness was the province of housewives, dimwits, narcissists, religious monomaniacs, and other undesirables of the current scene. One performed to absolve oneself of the need to be happy. During a performance, the prophesized transmogrification of the soul actually happened. The singer *became* the song. It was not “so to speak.” It was real. It actually happened. Stare into Bobby’s face when launching into the third verse and you’ll know this was the holy truth:

You gave me days of sunshine/
You gave me nights of cheer/
You made my life an enchanted dream/
'Til somebody else came near/
Somebody else came near you/

I felt the winter's chill/
And now I sit and wonder night and day/
Why I love you still?

Something had been made here apparently out of nothing. Herein was a miracle every bit as mystifying as the Big Bang. But only Jim Gleitz had conceptualized it as such. So many were lost in their own dreams that they were unable to see how True Art affected reality, molded it and shaped it to its own ends and irrevocably. To be a soul diver was to be an appreciator of True Art. As truth beauty, beauty truth. He thought it self-evident even though Gleitz' fellow apes found it absurd. To them, the function of art was to enable their personal visions. Which were profound misconceptions about the way things truly were. This False Art was not important in any way. Or important only in a minor way, subordinate to the content creators' personal visions, which were so much masturbatory wish fulfillment: the possessing of superpowers, for example. Or a concept that a friendly and just superbeing took care of the friendly and just, to the detriment of all others.

Gleitz thought it absurd that this would be so. But he wasn't prepared to argue the point. Simply because opening another person's eyes to the truth never had seemed an appealing act.

"I think I have something profound to learn that has nothing to do with your affliction," Gleitz said to the Hoseas and began in his own interior way to get ready to leave. He could see that the cut segments of the spacetime worm were dying, each caught up in the ecstasy of timelessness. The still intact segments were struggling to reconnect with each other, failing, and branching off into strange, multifoliate lifepaths. In the posterior segment two possibilities occurred, one wherein Hosea killed his

other. This caused the segments to knot badly and form vestigial scales of personhood rather than fully formed segments. In the anterior segment, the worm had hooked itself into a circle. It was attempting unsuccessfully to merge with its recent past to form an eternal return. It was jealous apparently of the dying segments Hosea had freed from the whole. It had wanted to be like one of them.

Turn 8: A Sheepshank as Superior to a Shanked Sheep

By the time Gleitz left, daylight of some intense, unnatural luminosity was bearing down on the world of tea cozies and holy visions.

“Feels like it’s a green light almost, coming from a three-hundred-watt bulb in a ceiling just overhead,” he said to himself taking the first steps outside. Such light tended to create deep and long shadows in all objects it cast itself upon. Including Gleitz himself. As he ran, he couldn’t help staring down at the objects running after him. Here was a series of personal shadows. He thought how strange he and they were locked in a perfect pantomime. He thought eventually the shadows would overtake him then dictate the movements that he, the shadows’ shadow, would have to make. It would be a perfect and profound struggle for as long they remained alive. And when one shadow died surely the other shadow would. Thus, the need for Gleitz to hurry through this disturbing dreamscape before the sun sank. Mortality was encountered with every crunching step through crusty snow. He wondered if he would know when he died. The paradox of death,

the being of nonbeing, was likely unsolvable. So, he would have to cross that bridge when he came to it.

He had at present a deep notion of where he wanted to go, but no true sense of how to get there.

“I think I’m fucked,” he admitted to an inanimate toadstool he had identified when he had squatted down exhausted. He realized that he had been long without food. He thought himself incapable of further striving without an encounter with a cheeseburger and fries. Maybe something with a little bite to it too. He wouldn’t have minded a dram of scotch. He wouldn’t have minded a little bit of cocaine to advance the day’s progress past the point that it could be objectified and openly mocked as not containing any sort of challenge at all.

He had felt death recline in the direction of the cabin, but he didn’t have the strength to move past it. More so, the poisonous liniment that had infiltrated his skin had been affecting him of late. He had looked up at the clouds and saw anything but clouds. Objects and epochs appeared and vanished in front of him in milliseconds. His own body was undergoing serious changes constantly. Changes by gender as well as by genus and phyla. He hadn’t understood the danger he had encountered when first confronting Hosea. He had thought himself above it all and indeed he was. This did not mean that temporarily at least he was in a bad way.

The toadstool became a button that when depressed exposed a great metallic ramp that led into the earth.

“Should I go down?” Gleitz asked one of his many micro-identities, Richard Rollo, which had formed at the time he was flat on his back. For some reason he stuck around.

Richard Rollo had been a mail carrier in Ames, Iowa from 1979 to his retirement via heart attack in 2010. Everybody loved him as if they were one of

their own. He was a deeply reasonable person. He could be trusted to give good advice.

In this incarnation, Richard had on his prized Andre Dawson Cubs jersey, circa 1985. He had a constantly sculpted moustache in the shape of a sideways turned hourglass. His leather mailbag was at his side presently empty. This was a symbol for something. Gleitz knew, but Lord knew what. He had his hair slicked back with pome-aid which may have been the prevailing style in his day amongst mailmen in Ames, Iowa. These mysteries needed to be resolved. Richard Rollo was Jim Gleitz' tulpa. Gleitz assumed he was responsible for his wellbeing. He assumed presently he was the only one who could see him let alone give a shit about him.

According to Richard Rollo, Gleitz was on a sacred quest.

"The questor always encounters obstacles to surmount, demons to vanquish, and bad memories to lay low," he said to Gleitz then blew a bubble with the gum he had been busy smacking. Grape Hubba-Bubba as it turned out, which Gleitz thought was a still un-decoded sign from his recent past. Richard was telling him to walk down the ramp regardless. He thought it was something a hero would do. Richard was telling him to suck it up and embrace his fate.

Gleitz didn't believe in fate. At least in the sense Richard Rollo was conceptualizing fate as presently.

"I need more clarity," he said to Rollo, his tulpa, who was in no position to explain himself further. He, too, was a shadow of a shadow. He spoke only within the parameters of his programming. And once confronted with the incompleteness of a given statement, he could not be prompted to explain further. Only real people possessed the ability to explain further. They possessed the ability to see outside the walls of the narrative. All the rest were

mere characters. It didn’t matter if they were real flesh and blood, they were just characters. In a real pinch like now they had nothing significant to say.

Gleitz rose and walked toward it, not looking behind him to see if Richard Rollo was following. At the ramp’s edge he turned around and asked Richard for the mailbag.

“But,” Richard Rollo said in reply, “how come? Well, how come?”

“Pardon?” Jim Gleitz asked.

“How would I deliver the mail,” Richard said, “if I don’t have it?”

Gleitz walked over to Richard and forcibly removed the pouch from him. “Nowadays,” he said to Richard, “most meaningful correspondence takes place inside the brain between the societies of mind. The parcels the USPS trades in,” he said, “are mostly junk mail. It’s a great service,” he said, “to relieve the general public of its unnecessary correspondence. It’s junk mail. They’ll be deeply appreciative of it after the fact,” he said. “They’ll thank you for it profusely even though they might not be completely aware why they are so happy about it.”

Once inside the ramp and at its gravelly bottom, Gleitz stared up at Richard’s doughy form flickering in the harsh light.

“Are we gonna see each other again?” he asked Richard.

Richard Rollo didn’t have an answer for him. He was a mailman who had lately been stripped of his mail sack. There was nothing more pathetic than a mailman without his mail sack.

He might as well have blown his brains out at that point and called it a life.

Turn 9

At the end of the run into the ramp was a narrow cave. And at the end of the cave were thirty flights of metallic stairs. The stairs led straight down. And past the third flight, the lights on the surrounding walls that had shown Gleitz the way were missing. By the fifth flight he had to feel around to keep himself upright. By the sixth flight he had been reduced to crawling like a drunk. He would occasionally turn backwards and crawl that way as if he was descending a ladder. It couldn't be helped. Because the vertigo that the dark had caused had been too great. When upright, he felt he was about to tumble to his death. Up until flight ten there had been a railing to grip. Past flight ten, he would palpate the iron grate he was on with one heel. By moving in this way, Gleitz was able to reach the bottom in the better part of an hour. Presently, he had no choice in the matter. The compulsion to descend was all-powerful. He kept assuming the steps would end with an invisible ledge over which he would plummet, perhaps forever or perhaps until he contacted the ground. He was torn which of these was the preferable outcome.

It wasn't until flight twenty-seven that the dim light from the stairs' bottom had filtered up to Gleitz. Seeing it, he was filled with exceptional joy of

the sort he had not experienced since childhood. His death was certain, but it was unlikely to happen so many hundreds of feet below ground. He was one of those who harbored superstitions despite his stated beliefs. He thought dying in an unclean place would cause disastrous effects in the afterlife. He assumed No Good Thing Happened this far down. He assumed that if the devil existed this was the sort of modernist entrance he would have constructed for his den.

The light was low as candle power but cold and white.

“Finally,” Gleitz said to himself once off the stairs. He tested the ground underneath his feet. There was a vinyl coating on it or some sort of similar polymer. It stuck slightly to his boots as he was sliding over it.

As his eyes adjusted to the low light, Gleitz discovered that he was standing in an enormous room.

“Well, here’s something,” he said and picked a random direction to travel. As he did, he rendered scuff marks in the floor with his hiking boots. He was attempting to create a breadcrumb trail for himself. He assumed this was the point of this tribulation: to become lost in the dark and grow ignorant of the way in. He assumed that the light cast around the stairs wouldn’t be visible for more than twenty feet. The room had no tangible walls nor any discernable noise to gauge a direction if it came to that. It was the scruff marks alone that gave him hope to return. Of course, he could barely move forward this way. He assumed there was deep shame involved in merely returning from where he came. He had a job to do. He had promised Hosea Miller. He was determined to get to the bottom of this mystery. That was his essential nature. His essential

programming. That was why he was this person and not some other person.

He moved forward at six-foot intervals, taking care to stamp his heel and scrape it across the pliant floor. But around thirty yards in he started to slack off with the marking. Somehow the absolute profundity of the darkness had hypnotized him, and he grew rapidly passive. Once more he had taken to feeling around and using one leg like a proboscis to feel around. This seemed to be his natural inclination. He seemed to have an unconscious desire to get lost in the dark. It had proven alluring. He had wanted to fall into the dark, as a toddler was filled with the desire to fall into the crinoline folds of its mother's skirt. Now he thought it preferable to die in the dark rather than live in light. The dark was cool and comforting surrounding his skin. He felt it had been made just for him.

When in the pure dark, when there's nothing to do and no impediments encountered, the tracking of time becomes impossible. That's what time was: the perceived sequence of physical events. And when events failed to transpire, time evaporated into the ether.

So it was that Gleitz was bereft of an answer when he was asked by the Man Behind the Desk how long exactly had he been in his office. He felt he had aged tangibly since fording the last stair. But it could have legitimately been a couple of hours or twenty-two years. He would have believed either value. He was leaning to the latter value, actually. But he would have believed either one if proffered.

The Man Behind the Desk was backlit by what seemed like a candle on the floor. This was how, short of mystical intervention, Gleitz had managed to navigate his way toward him from a huge distance away like a navigator-less ship fixing on a lighthouse.

“I don’t have an appointment,” Gleitz said to the Man Behind the Desk facetiously when close enough to assume his voice would carry. He wasn’t looking for trouble from him, Lord knew. But perhaps he was desirous of a sense of direction. The set-up down here seemed far too much absent a grand revelation about the nature of his quest. The Desk, for example, could have been set up relatively close to the stairs from which Gleitz had descended an uncertain time ago. There was no need for such ostentation. What needed to be said could have been said expeditiously. Presently he was slightly tired, and definitely annoyed. He thought he was entitled to a jibe at this creature’s expense.

The Man Behind the Desk demonstrated no anger concerning Gleitz’ presumptuousness. As he had demonstrated no delight concerning his presence. Possessed of parts of mysteriously eviscerated dolls rather than fleshy features, he seemed empty of expressiveness even at his most emotive. His eyes were plastic buttons with blue eye decals peeling off them. His mouth was a lurid lipstick plastic formed into the shape of an “o.” Tiny fat hands for ears and air spun from red thread with the needles still present in the scalp. For such a creature emotiveness was not an attainable goal. He would in time reveal the level of his pique. He sat rail straight in a beautiful oak chair. The desk was beautiful and made of maple. Gleitz thought it must have weighed a thousand pounds. Perhaps it was illusory and weighed nothing.

On the desk there was a green blotter. And on the blotter sat the Man’s ivory-colored hands twittering away.

“Two sparrows on a branch in early spring engaged in a battle dance,” Gleitz said out loud when staring at the Man’s spastic hands. This was what they reminded him of, sitting in the tiny guest

chair in front of the desk. Two flitting birds. Perhaps they didn't resemble this at all, but this was what it reminded Gleitz of. He was no ornithologist. Perhaps he was tripping on an eidetic memory culled from a childhood experience. Eventually Gleitz realized that he had said exactly what the Man Behind the Desk wanted him to say. This was how the Man communicated likely, through abstract hand gestures that spurred vision or recollection. He thought it just as well if this was so. He was tired of getting bitched at. He thought such a method of communication (if that's what it was) to be far superior to talking (bitching). It penetrated to the heart of the matter directly. Whereas words merely circled the drain like Janet Leigh's blood in the shower.

Gleitz thought vaguely about trying to replicate the patterns of the Man's hands before deciding it might just be easier to talk.

"I'm looking for a particular skeleton key," he said. Then he sat back as the show began.

The Man Behind the Desk laid his hands flat on the green desk blotter next to each other. Then he raised up his thumbs. Soon the thumbs began to twiddle over each other, putting Gleitz in mind of an eggbeater maybe or magnets in turbines. Some engram was being formed whose meaning he was presently unaware. Gleitz thought he was being coached to seek alternate sources of power. Some structure within the American West maybe if such a place still existed. Gleitz should go to Hoover Dam and stare down at its curvilinear catch wall and contemplate. Supposedly there were workers still buried in the wall's concrete. He would stand near the massive turbines until it all made sense to him. The magnets of the turbines were like circling sparrows, making ready to attack. This Gleitz had seen from close many times during his Michigan

boyhood. He had understood nature as a death struggle, not some narcotizing waltz. The key to happiness was to remove oneself from nature. But it was everywhere obviously except in dreams. Its greatest evocation was the supermassive black hole at the center of the Milky Way galaxy, Sagittarius A*. Eventually Sagittarius A*, this so-called Thanatosis, and the supermassive black hole in the onrushing Andromeda galaxy would perform a dance and merge. A massive gravity wave would result, and the egg of God would hatch. Another word for this occurrence would be Death. A paper would be crumpled and thrown into the fire. And nobody would be able to read what was written on it.

Jim Gleitz thought, *if only I could be God and witness this great convergence*. He thought all the secrets of the world would be made plain at that moment. Perhaps the Man Behind the Desk was the type of God who would live to see the black hole convergence. Perhaps he had done so already, and this was why he was here to report to Gleitz on the great event. He knew that no mortal could ever bear witness to it. By the time it happened all the stars in every galaxy would have been extinguished. And the dance would occur in an illimitable blackness.

Gleitz bowed his head and asked the Man Behind the Desk his advice on matters relating to Gleitz' immediate care.

"Is there a place to lie down?" Gleitz asked the Man whose face offered no display of either pity or contempt. "I have a human body," he said to him. "It requires replenishing occasionally. And I underestimated the length journey down here."

In the eyelet of one of the Man's eye buttons, just above a peeling decal, there was the nub of red thread. Taking it between one pair of vibrating thumb and forefingers, the Man Behind the Desk

pinched the thread and pulled. Soon the length of thread spilled across the green blotter onto the plastic floor at Jim Gleitz' feet.

Gleitz picked up the end of the red thread and put it in his mouth. It didn't taste like anything it shouldn't taste like. The thread was thread-flavored it seemed to Gleitz, rolling it around in his tongue then swallowing the first parcel that he had gathered in his mouth.

"It's not meant to be food, is it?" he asked the Man Behind the Desk whose hands were now back on the green blotter, palms down, twittering. Sustenance was supposed to taste like something. But this thread was one of the more tasteless objects in the universe. Its purpose was merely to bind something, to tie at one end and tie at the other. It by itself offered nothing in the way of sustenance. But it might bind a suppliant to his sustaining object. It needed to be tied off at a bitter end and knotted through. Like a button was bound to cloth by thread, it required a firm grip on the objects it bound.

After ten feet or so of the thread was consumed, Gleitz leaned over the desk and began to slurp greedily. He was approaching ever closer to the buttonhole through which the thread protruded. From somewhere. As he approached with both his consciousness and innards, he could see the buttonhole growing ever larger.

He wondered vaguely what would happen should he make it to the other side. Soon it would be big enough that he couldn't help falling in. Soon it would be all around him, swallowing the universe as it swallowed him. The buttonhole was an unblinking eye in the same manner as a supermassive black hole was an unblinking eye. You approached it on an asymptote, a line that never converged to its attracting surface. The tragic astronaut would

forever be stuck on its surface, but forever falling in. Vaguely, Gleitz thought this was a sad situation. On the other hand, the laws of nature were impervious to human preference. They were indifferent to the moral categories the demented monkeys of Earth assigned to it. They didn’t care. They operated on their own blindly, in a void.

Either way, the astronaut was fucked. There was no curing this form of insanity which was objective reality. Only in dreams did happiness dwell. The sage soul turned away from science altogether as a matter of self-preservation. He had no choice in the matter.

Turn 10: A Figure Eight

The tragic astronaut was oblivious of his fate. As the event horizon that he crossed was a mathematical abstraction rather than a tangible boundary. It existed merely to satisfy a series of equations which were themselves abstractions concerning The Way Things Were. So, in a way, a black hole had neither a beginning nor an end. It existed in the same way the universe it swam in existed, beyond an ordinary concept of a simple thing. Yet it was deeply real. Realer than the simple souls on earth who grew r**EVULT**ed at its actuality. It sat in the bath of reality, cold and eternal, and waited. There was no conclusion to tease from it. Other than that humanity was fucked (and this should have been already known well before, memorized like a song learned in nursery school until the words spilt from the mouth unconsciously and thus could rightly be conceptualized as having nothing to do with language:

Three blind mice,
Three blind mice,
See how they run!
They all ran after the farmer's wife,
Who cut off their tails,
With a carving knife.

Did you ever see such a thing in your life,
As three blind mice?

The Schwarzschild Metric, you should know, was the solution to the Einstein field equations that described the gravitational field outside a spherical mass.

“I’ve got an overarching concept about its relevance,” Siddhartha “Sid” Mahadevan said to Bill Apple from the seat next to him in the large lecture room on the first floor of Sequoia Hall. In front of him, a bow-tied visiting lecturer named Hans Leitung was doubled over. Having stopped momentarily to pull a bit of red thread from his mouth, now it seemed Hans had lost his way. His notes had fallen from the dais and scattered on the hardwood floor. His maw was wide open, downturned towards the world. Three feet below was a beet red mass of saliva-soaked thread. And growing, growing by the second.

On the reporter’s notepad, Sid quickly wrote down the line element for the radius as he recalled it from last night’s reading:

$$g = -c^2\,d\tau^2 = -\left(1 - \frac{r_\mathrm{s}}{r}\right)c^2\,dt^2 + \left(1 - \frac{r_\mathrm{s}}{r}\right)^{-1}dr^2 + r^2 g_\Omega,$$

Where **t** is the time coordinate (measured by a stationary clock located infinitely far from the massive body), and **r** is the radial coordinate (measured as the circumference, divided by 2π, of a sphere centered around the massive body).

Sid held the notebook up to Bill.

“Anything look familiar to you,” he asked him.

Irritable from “High Tea” withdrawal, Bill Apple was loath to mimic the affectations of callow curiosity that his roommate Sid was trying to elicit from him.

“You’re saying that the proper time is related to the massive object’s radii,” he said. “Well, we already knew that didn’t we?” Bill said. “I mean, that’s what we should have been learning about today according to the syllabus, what whatshisface,” Bill said, gesturing to the doubled over Hans Leitung “was supposed to have been lecturing about all along. The possible solutions to the field equations. But instead, we got silent agony. And now we’re sitting here floating in dead space. No place to move forward from or back from. We’re sitting here in this slightly smelly room waiting for something significant to happen. And I’m telling you right now I don’t think that there will be anything significant happening. Not here in this place if we are present. The waveform remains collapsed if we are observing. You want to breathe mystery into the universe, you have to remove your consciousness from it, I think,” Bill said. “Or change your consciousness to forestall the poisoning of the universe by it. But I have no idea how this might take place, Sid,” Apple told him. “Who knows if it’s possible. I have no idea how to subjectify objectivity. You can dig the Buddha up and ask him. My best guess would be no. It’s not possible. So, there’s no use crying over spilt milk.”

The point that Sid Mahadevan was making with the line element, the notion he was trying to navigate through his own head as filtered through Bill Apple’s ornery persona, was that a massive object need not have a massive volume to be a black hole. Neither Einstein’s nor Schwarzschild’s equations said that this was necessary (as a radius was a measurement of area, not volume). In fact, black holes could be better understood as objects possessing a volume of zero, which was to say, as two-dimensional objects withdrawn from three-dimensional spacetime. Or impacted in spacetime

as a burrowing tick is impacted into skin. The event horizon formed a continuity with spacetime but was not, strictly speaking, of spacetime. It was spacetime's end point, its terminus. Or, better said, its primordial state. It's two-dimensional, a disk, not a hole. Therefore, there was no falling into it or falling through it. The distance from its actual surface to the distance from the most proximate point in spacetime would be infinite. It did not swallow objects so much as disperse them, recording their information as quantum particles on its ever-expanding area.

"It's all here in the metric," Sid said to Bill with growing excitement, and drew a flat black circle on the notebook. "I mean, where are they accounted for, the light cones present and future that end in a point? Schwarzschild calculates radius alone absent of volume. It's deeply strange. Which doesn't make it untrue. And I was thinking, say around three this morning, when I was in the middle of this thought experiment…"

Sid trailed off as students slowly began in a slow pachyderm rhythm to rise from their seats. The red thread apparently would not halt anytime soon from Dr. Leitung's gaping mouth. Presently the pile had reached his ankles, glimmering there from the hall's proscenium like lengths of gutted bird intestine tied together immaculately.

There seemed no end in sight.

Students had grown bored with the spectacle and began to leave. Maybe they had another class across campus after this one and needed to leave early. If so, Sid thought, wouldn't they have done so in all the lectures before this one? Or why schedule a class whose scheduling conflicted with the one before it? Were they all intent on graduating this semester so it couldn't be avoided? Did they all have jobs waiting for them in Silicon Valley? Or

maybe in the deep mines of western Utah where the ingredients for High Tea were being excavated? For some reason they needed brainy types on site out there. It wasn't a simple extraction process like coal mining. There was a certain amount of know-how required relating to its engineering, metallurgy, and, for some reason, philosophy.

According to Bill Apple, Hans Leitung was a hotshot from the Max Plank Institute flown out here at university expense just for this single lecture.

"Nothing but the best for the Future Leaders of Tomorrow," Apple said to Sid once they too had decamped to the Oval. "Let no educational stone be left unturned on these future oligopolists' behalf," he said. "All these fucking Stanford vampires, these corporatized sycophants, these grade grubbers, these rectal mucus slurpers, these autism spectrum dwellers, these mama's lil' precious, these daddy's lil' treasures, these soulless/artless hacks," Bill said and put on his sunglasses. "*White People* in the parlance of the day, I'm saying. The present academic fashion is to belittle white people. But look who's doing the belittling! Any person connected with Stanford University has no right to level a charge of cultural hegemony against another race: white, black, yellow or red. Because Stanford University and places like it *are* the hegemon. So, you see I've decided to become a black person. A nigg-ah! As all the white people at Stanford have announced of late that whiteness should be destroyed. Don't know if I'll go the Full Monty by moving to South Central, but I've definitely decided to become black. Your average shuffling redneck in 2017 America is a Trump voter from Alabama. I bond with the oppressed, definitely. And the crackers of Stanford University, be they white, black, yellow, can go fuck themselves if they don't like it. Yes, Sid, real White People need to be

oppressed. The majority of these are tenured radicals at American universities. They need to be herded into football stadiums where some gallows have been built on the fifty-yard line. Fuck Donald Trump. We don't need a modern-day Andrew Jackson. We need a modern-day Chairman Mao! Somebody to balance the cultural books using the blood of our oppressors as ink. And Stanford University should be the first institution targeted for reeducation. Herd all these post-structuralists, all these diversity capos, these Title IX hags, and the cultural Marxists into the football stadium. And everybody else out into the Central Valley. Have the B-schoolers and the Hoover Institute libertarians meet their new wetback bosses. Let 'em pick lettuce for ten hours a day in hundred-degree heat at six cents a pound! Soften 'em up like milk-fed veal in a lightless stall. Take all their faggoty opprobrium against the American gun culture and use it as a cudgel against them. You can say to them, 'don't you wish you were packing heat when we came for you?' Oh, yes! In the America of the Great Leap Forward only the rednecks will live freely. I tell you, the second American revolution will put the first revolution to shame. This is the moment we as a nation will cherish for millennia. Our football stadiums with their blood-soaked field turfs will become political shrines. Infertile maids will come and dip their dress hems in the stains at midfield. These suppliants would have long since internalized the notion of America as God. As all those who believed in America-as a-Republic are now long gone. I think the long slide down started in the eighties when they started banning Mark Twain on campus. I think a couple 'niggers' uttered every so often is good for the soul. Poor Mark Twain! He never hurt anybody. Now look at him: a disgrace in his own country. He's not my favorite author by any

means. But he deserved far better treatment than what he's receiving now."

If Professor Leitung was sick, Sid opined, he should have announced he was sick rather than upchucking like that on stage.

"I mean," he said to Bill, "it kept going and going! He was pulling at it for a while with his fingers. Then he let peristalsis and gravity do the work for him. As if he was too exhausted to help himself out."

Too bad as Sid (in the form of a classroom question of course) was going to present his theory of black hole as a two-dimensional structure to Leitung. Surely such insight would be rewarded with a fellowship at minimum and maybe, if he could flesh out the ideas mathematically, with a PhD. Sid at age twenty thought such an honor was late in coming for one such as brilliant as him. By age twenty-five he would surely proffer a theory of quantum gravity based on his work with black holes. A Nobel Prize (belatedly) would be awarded by age thirty. He would need a date for the ceremony, he thought, apart from his dear old mum. He wondered vaguely if hookers could be hired for such an event at a discount if there was no sex involved. He also wondered if it could be expensed out to Stanford who surely would be obsequious to Sid's needs once being made aware that in their employ was the modern-day Einstein, a product of the same school at which he was now a tenured prof.

"The Indian Einstein is not pleased by such a vulgar display," Sid said using the nickname he had given to himself. Unctuous undergrad utterance this, and even in his sluggish state Bill Apple was quick to anger because of it.

"You're not the Indian Einstein," he said, "and neither is Ramanujan," Bill said. "Not Nagarjuna and not Aryabhata," he said. "You must give the title

away. Instead give it to D.R. Karmarkar. Yes, D.R. Karmarkar, the sage of Calcutta who demonstrated the futility of being long before Schrodinger and his cat, Fritzie, ever did. He wrote it all out on a single piece of paper and died of consumption shortly thereafter. Long forgotten except for us devotees of High Tea. We drink to his name whenever possible. He is our sage as Einstein is yours, apparently. And it remains to be seen whose notoriety outlives the other. Because, I mean, how many of your fellow men do you think understand general relativity? I mean understand it deeply at a Kip Thorne level? Maybe two hundred at most would you say? The majority being hopeless spazzes like you. They'll never get laid, never pass their sublime genes on. And you know who is getting laid?" Bill Apple said, "I mean even now? As we speak?"

It was a set-up line and Sid knew it. But he couldn't help responding. Bill Apple had some sort of Pavlovian hold on him in this way. He called and Sid responded. He wondered if it involved a manner of indirect hypnosis.

"Your mama," Sid said. "That's who. With a stranger who just happened by?"

From out of his backpack Apple removed a flyer that had been torn off a Serra Street kiosk minutes before class.

"As a concerned citizen," Apple said to him, "as somebody who is still in possession of enough morality to give a tiny shit about his fellow men, I'm begging you to perform due diligence. I mean, a randy fuck like you is the cause of most of the human-made suffering in the world. It's obvious, is it not? Evil is merely sexual frustration redirected. Pure and simple. I mean, what do you think World War Two was about? Hitler had only got one ball, Goring had two but they're small. Etcetera and etcetera. You, Sid Mahadevan, have sexual harasser

written all over you. You'll likely start a business just to hire beautiful women and sniff their chair seats after meetings. You're the passive, quiet sort girls must look out for. It's not your fault entirely but you're not making the most of a bad situation. The sad truth is guys like you need to go the extra mile to get laid. It's not an automatic thing like whatshisface the date rapist: captain of the football team. You blame girls for it deep down, admit it. They reject you. And who wouldn't? It's only natural. And, so, your hostility towards women grows incrementally daily. Can't be helped except with the judicious exercising of corrective behavior. But you're such a snob you're not aware when somebody's trying to help you," he said. "You look at life in general and pronounce it contrary to the scientific enterprise."

Slowly Apple unfolded the flyer torn from the kiosk. When he had it flattened out properly, he gave it to Sid to cogitate on fully:

Wanna Get Laid Daily?

The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints (Mormon)

Our Motto: "The Way to success is the Way to suck seed"

"I'm Only in it for the free pussy"

--Joseph Smith

Eventually Sid refolded the flyer back in fourths.

“I wasn’t aware,” he said to Bill “*The Harvard Lampoon* had established a West Coast chapter.”

Bill told Sid, “There’s so much about the world you don’t know about, friend. So much you still need to experience.”

In Sid’s mouth of late, just along the gum line, a foreign object had made an appearance, just now becoming annoying enough that he felt the desire to grab it with a finger.

The thread that he pulled out of it was beet red and seemingly the same make as Dr. Leitung’s.

He showed it to Apple.

“It’s an ominous sign,” Bill Apple said. Then he slunk away.

Sid Mahadevan needed more information. “Why?” he asked Bill. “Why is it ominous?”

Bill turned and walked away.

Said Sid to Bill’s back, “do you know anything about this? You freak! And more so,” he said, “more so…”

Bill Apple turned around.

“Yes?”

“What the fuck is a latter-day saint anyway?” Sid threw the thread on the ground.

Turn 11: Knot Theory and Its Ramifications

Now, Joseph Smith.

He lived in the woods near Palmyra, New York. Then one day, friends, a Nephite prophet in the guise of the Angel Moroni happened by. Moroni was accompanied by God the Father, a being with an overlarge forehead and sweaty palms.

“Freak, quit it with the digressions,” Miss Pam Wednesday said to Cho K. Point, the narrator of this tale, then lit a joint. Big old cohiba-like blunt this doobie, made of an ounce of God’s Cough that Pam had smuggled out of the dispensary that morning. It being free, she saw no reason to conserve it. Plenty more where that came from. Besides, Pam was used to having a big ass brown blunt between her lips as opposed to those teeny-weeny white cigarettes [*insert dick joke here, ed*.] smoked by your Average Upstanding Narc (AUN). She used Backwoods leaf and made it with Tender Loving Care. She was so meticulous the YouTube video she had made of the blunt’s creation had gone, as the narcs say, viral. Five million three hundred thousand eighty hundred and sixty-nine Views according to YouTube’s famous ticker as of two hours ago. Not to be falsely modest, but she had stopped checking recently. She assumed five million views was the make-or-break

number for her. And, apparently, she was broken. The video had been demonetized by the Google fascists long ago. And Backwoods had not yet called with an endorsement deal as she assumed would have been the case once five million views came about.

Pam Wednesday wanted to get high in relative peace. As of late pot smoking had become a contemplative act for her. She had had it with Cho K. Point's dithering manner of storytelling. She thought it was a borderline rude affect. Cho didn't know that people had better things to do than sit and listen to inane stories. Pam thought Cho thought she had a captive audience. Nothing could be further from the truth. She didn't want to be rude, but she would be rude if push came to shove. Push came to shove usually when people interposed themselves between Pam and her herb.

Nowadays she lived to get high. And she found herself increasingly in pot heaven. NoCal was the place to be when living the marijuana lifestyle. But, then again, increasingly NoCal was the residence for freaks like Cho K. Point as well.

In the center of Cho K's black horn-rimmed Buddy Holly's there was glued a skull and crossbones that she kept using as a handle to pull them up the bridge of her nose.

"The digression," she told Pam Wednesday, "is often enough the straightest narrative path possible."

It sounded like a line from a Bruce Lee movie and Pam told Cho this.

"I've never seen one of his movies," she told Pam. "At least all the way through. Their violence is appalling to me despite my supreme understanding of Shaolin practices. I much prefer Drunken Boxing as practiced by the monks anyway to Lee's off the cuff "street" style. He was a wastrel of Hong Kong

despite his upper-class roots. I have long ago decided to disregard his work entirely."

Sitting in bamboo stool of her own creation, Cho felt the need to straighten her shoulders before continuing.

"The Angel Moroni," she said to Pam, and conceptualized her spine as inflexible as a shower curtain. "The Angel Moroni was a beautiful teenaged boy with golden pubic hair like a bed of dried kelp that had lost its chlorophyll.

"If it were me and not Joseph Smith there," Cho said to Pam, "I'd have fucked him on the spot rather than listen to his spiel. His spiel was this: that there were these Golden Plates buried somewhere in the Palmyra, New York area. Twelve Golden Plates so it was explained on whose surface contained the Third Testament of the Bible. You have your first testament of the Bible which is the Jew Bible with all the curses and the casting out. The Bible's second testament concerns the Hero of This World, a certain Mr. Jesus Christ. It ends badly for him in the end," Cho K. Point testified. "Just as it ends badly for most of us in the end. The third testament was that which Moroni and God the Father were attempting to give to Joseph Smith. But he kept blowing it big time. He wouldn't shut up about certain things that within earshot of such an exalted presence of the GodFather (get it?) shouldn't have been rightly talked about. So, they put him on probation and made him wait before he was able to see what was on the plates. He needed to be given seer stones to read the writings on them. They were like these weird thick glasses and each of the lenses had a name," Cho said. "And, eventually, they vanished and the plates along with them."

To Pam Wednesday, this was reminiscent of the same sort of online confidence scheme one read about constantly nowadays. Yes, a Nigerian princess

was looking to be reinstalled onto her throne. And the sum required from you to earn her constant gratitude was three thousand four hundred ninety-six dollars thirty-eight cents. Yes, please remit three thousand four hundred ninety-six dollars thirty-eight cents immediately and the princess will be in your debt forever. Asking for any objective proof of the claim would shatter the bond of trust trying to be forged. This was how gullible people were roped in. They exchanged critical thoughts about the promise of a future reward. It was obvious and pathetic. It was in the manner of all organized religion, she thought. Which begged the obvious question about Smith's involvement in Cho K. Point's story to begin with.

The story was, Pam assumed, a bit of spiritual anthropology intended for her alone. It was an attempt by Cho to understand her fellow humans from the outside only. Like a good anthropologist, Cho neither affirmed nor denied the belief systems she was in the process of sketching out. Merely, she cataloged them as a boon to her own tenuous understanding of what made other people tick. Weird and brilliant in equal measures, Cho K. Point had been accused on more than one occasion of being on the autism spectrum. It was probably true, but you could say the same for thirty percent, forty percent of the engineers in Silicon Valley. She seemed to fit in well with her fellow Google coders or at least was too oblivious to realize that she didn't. Her group was creating the code for cloud-enabled AI. It had something to do with analyzing the content of user images and messages. In real time, bosses wanted to know what was being said and more importantly who was saying it. The internet was getting ready to eat its young and this system was a prominent glutton. The racists and sexists of the world would be forever banned from

online communication! If the banned users wanted to, they could write letters to each other (or not really after the USPS, per Republican demands, was privatized and all written content parsed). Maybe they could still speak to each other directly, though GoogleFacebookTwitter was hard at work on this, too. They were as a consortium beta testing a cheek-installed chip that converted voice patterns to binary code. The consortium intended to give the chip away with new phones and wait a decade for it to gain user acceptance. Eventually the government would mandate “convenience” rules for itself. It was all very rote from their perspective. They were always surprised at a watchdog’s surprise that this was taking place.

At Google you didn’t have to be especially brilliant to code, just knowledgeable about coding language, capable of a certain degree of logical abstraction, and possessed of the ability to sit in front of a computer sixteen hours a day.

“Smith’s first convert was also his amanuensis, Martin Harris,” Cho said to Pam Wednesday who had made up her mind to slink off to her room and light up a fatty within five minutes. “He had a falling out with he and his wife Lucy Harris, because they wanted to see the plates.”

From her cushion on the floor, Pam Wednesday raised her hand to get Cho to stop. “So let me get this shit straight,” she said to her. “You’re saying the Harris’s never saw these golden plates? Which was the basis of an entire motherfucking religion? A religion for who people would wander into the unknown desert to practice at the behest of a man they barely knew? Boggles the mind,” Pam said. “It’s worse than the Nigerian princess scam, actually.”

Momentarily, Cho let her Buddy Holly’s slip all the way down the bridge of her nose.

“The Nigerian princess,” Cho K. Point said. “Which one?”

In Pam Wednesday’s consideration, people were getting stupider by the day. But presently with this early bit of Mormon history in mind she wasn’t so sure.

“I mean there’s a difference between a cynic and a skeptic,” she told Cho. “One of these is actually good for society.”

Lucy Harris, according to Cho, was one of These.

“Lucy told Martin to take the first book that he had copied, The *Book of Lehi*,” she said to Pam Wednesday, “and put it under lock and key. Then, considering the hidden plates were still in Smith’s possession, he should be able to re-dictate the book, all hundred and sixteen pages of it, perfectly.”

Maybe Lucy Harris just wanted to see what was being written, what it was all about, Cho said. But whatever it was about it was a good test regardless, she said. Merely because God’s presence shouldn’t be taken on faith. We all needed to buoy ourselves with belief, Cho said. But not to the exclusion of anything resembling reason or skeptical inquiry.

“The hundred and sixteen pages given to the Harris’ eventually disappeared,” Cho said. “This occurrence called into question the Harris’ dedication to the LDS Church completely.”

To Pam Wednesday, the Harrises were well rid of such rubbish based on the little that she had heard of Mormonism.

“Wanna get high?” she asked Cho knowing in advance the answer. It was an obvious maneuver: if you didn’t want to share your stash with anybody, you offered it to somebody you knew would turn it down. A win-win situation as they used to say in the psych classes Pam used to attend at UC Santa Cruz before dropping out. Except occasionally in Cho’s presence, she had never regretted the decision.

Roommates like her were annoying but financially necessary. Cho had the big bedroom and paid two thirds of the three thousand dollar a month rent for this seven hundred square foot roach trap. Pam didn't mind the roaches as long as they didn't get into her stash. She had taken to double bagging her supply lately and then wrapping the bags with a layer of cellophane. She read somewhere that the common roach was averse to cellophane. The wrap stuck to the mandibles and gummed up the works. Or something. To a roach it was like washing your face in crazy glue. She thought her stash was safe from the local fauna because of this precaution.

Indeed, Cho K. Point had never sampled anything stronger than a sip, just a sip mind you, of a coworker's latte.

"I'm not interested in the way nature can influence the mind," she said to Pam who was already preparing to imbibe. "More like the other way around."

She waited for that last thought to sink in. Then she said, "I want to know how much of so-called objective reality is socially constructed. A great deal of it is, I suspect. Though I haven't had time to prove the thesis. But to actually prove it, a person will be required to withdraw from sensation rather than luxuriate in it. Call it getting 'Low.' It is a place where the mind is completely focused and the body need fades," she said. "In this state you will need to focus on that which really matters. Such as the odd shape of God the Father's sweaty forehead once he revealed himself to Joseph Smith in the woods of Palmyra in 1823."

It was not faith that guided Joseph Smith but what an eighteenth-century philosopher called the Reason of the Senses. That is, Joseph first observed then inferred. Perhaps God the Father was hydrocephalic. And despite his omnipotence He was

unable to fully correct the deformity. Perhaps He was wearing an unpleasing fleshy exterior to disguise His true beauty from mortal men.

Regardless, Cho knew, there was a story behind it.

“You hold up your hand and see the skin and muscle and tendons there,” she said to Pam who was in the process slowly but surely of folding up into herself. “And the story is that these structures are composed of smaller structures that are composed of molecules and atoms that are composed of sub-atomic particles whose strange behavior dictates another branch of physics be applied to them. But, you see, we infer the invisible from the visible. All science rests on the Reason of the Senses, the notion that the evidence of our eyes corresponds to some version of reality,” she said. “Thus, the problem of sacred visions,” she said. “If the senses fail us in this case, who’s to say they don’t fail us always? They are rife with details that need to be explained. If only because the Reason of the Senses demands it. Demands it as a corrective to the relentless subjective dreamlife. Which is a modern stand in for hell.”

The way Pam Wednesday smoked her blunts was thusly: she placed the tip in between her right molars. Once the tip was rooted, she was able to actualize a type of circular breathing. She inhaled through the right side of her mouth and exhaled through her left side. She could be minimally communicative while she blew. The blunt never moved once fastened in place in its cockeyed position. Occasionally, almost unconsciously, she would hold up the coffee cup she was using for an ashtray and let the ash slide into it like the pyroclastic flow from a volcano. Bitch had this shit down to a science. She shouldda done a YouTube video on how to smoke the blunt as well as roll it. As

it burned down, the tip was gradually extended out of her mouth via her tongue. This too was second nature by now. It was a miracle of compact motion, her smoking. If anybody noticed, which nobody did, she would be termed an adept. She was really good at this but hadn't yet figured out a way to monetize it. She thought she was imitating Lil Wayne, though probably Weezy could have taken lessons from her.

Pam glommed on to the last part of what Cho was saying about the missing Mormon pages. Which was that reality was what you made of it. Or something of that ilk.

"I've had plenty of visions myself, girl," she said to Cho when the fattie was half-consumed. "But nobody had ever looked at them as representative of the type of mania you're describing here," she said. "I think it's all a matter of PR basically," she said. "The difference between a prophet and a lunatic. I mean, how many nuts have tried to start their own religion and failed? I think it's all in the delivery, the way you need to testify to others about your visions. Not so much in what you say (it's all the same anyway right? Fluttering angels in cylinders of light?) as the way you say it. You need to be emphatic about there always being a way out of this life. If you do so emphatically, others over time will see what you see. They'll be forced to see what you see over time."

She looked up from the pall of God's Cough that had formed itself into a veil around her.

"I mean," Pam said, "I agree with you that people don't see the evidence of their eyes. That they need prophecy of some kind to get them through the day. They're too weak or too hopeful maybe to take the truth straight. They require a mix of science and fantasy. So, it's good that there is religion in the world. Without it, people would be sad and violent like those in nuthouses. Maybe

that’s what mental illness is all about. The mix of science and fantasy is discombobulated with them. Pick one or the other. Maybe that choice is what we all need to restore our mental health.”

Hard to say how serious Pam Wednesday was about such matters, as by then she had smoked enough chronic to have kept Crosby, Stills, and Nash high through the second day of Woodstock and give their little friend Neil Young a buzz, too. She was a hardcore stoner and proud of it. She thought it an estimable accomplishment, for some reason. She loved the old Bukowski line about how it took work to be a drunk, whereas anybody could remain sober. Her goal was to be as fucked up as possible at all hours of the day while still remaining a productive citizen. This meant that her breakfast joint was considerably smaller than the Backwoods blunts for which she was justly famous. During work she only got high at team building events (such as closing-up shop early and getting high). She generally avoided hard drugs except when they were offered, and she seldom drank. But she was not “herself” (as went the old saw) for the majority of a given day. Routinely, she said shit that either she didn’t mean or couldn’t remember a minute after she said it. It was part of her shambolic charm, she figured, though others would dispute the assessment. These naysayers saw tragedy beneath Pam’s stoner vibe. Think of your average stoner’s behavior and attribute the loopy-ness and memory wipes to a motorcycle crash, say, rather than smoking herb and you sensed what they sensed about her. Nobody nowadays conceptualized recreational drugs as a liberating force. Even Pam wouldn’t have argued that marijuana made you more tolerant and creative. This was what had been argued (apparently) in the 1960s. She was into the lifestyle for fun as well as out of force of habit. She

thought herself inexplicably blessed despite all of this. She thought so many more people would be like her if only they had the guts to do so.

The strange thought occurred within Pam that she and Cho K. Point should start a church of their own with weed as a basic sacrament.

“Just like L. Ron Hubbard did,” she said to Cho who was staring straight-backed at her. “I mean, it’s a fucking gold mine, isn’t it?” she said. “I mean, it’s tax-free too.”

Pam thought that the first step in starting your own religion was to claim a First Vision. That is, God or an angel or the potentiality of the world told you something and then you told it to the world. That put you at the dead center of things. The people needed you to find out about God. And God for some weird reason needed a spokesman. He couldn’t merely take to Twitter and speak for Himself.

“You got ‘em all by the short hairs once your First Vision passes muster,” Pam told Cho and thought about a pizza run. Taco pizza, that is, topped with olives and jalapenos. She’d order a medium for herself and offer Cho a slice. And be turned down. It was a fiendish plan if ever there was one. As there was hamburger on it and she knew Cho was vegan.

According to Cho K. Point, there was just such a “First Vision” as Pam called it readily available. And it was all the more potent in her mind because it had really happened.

“There’s no testimony required other than God’s,” Cho K. Point said and removed from her frumpy Stanford hoodie an ornate absinthe spoon.

Pam Wednesday stared at the spoon’s ornate contours. She wondered when Cho had gotten into absinthe. She assumed Cho wasn’t into alcohol, never mind the hundred fifty proof euro-sleaze that

she assumed filtered through the porous spoon. She knew there was some sort of literary lineage to absinthe, but she didn’t think Cho was into literature so much either, coding manuals notwithstanding.

In the spade-shaped spoon two one winged angels faced each other in silhouette. Through their open beak-like mouths no noise was admitted.

Eventually Cho K. Point put the absinthe spoon back into the folds of her collegiate hoodie. Then she watched impassively as Pam Wednesday rolled over and fell asleep like a dog on the floor.

Turn 12

Are you gone?
Some fellows, they say, are possessed with the devil,
But this great fellow were able to possess the greatest
Devil, and make him worse.
--John Webster

"The Endless Knot (*le noeud sans fin*)," the mesmerist, natural philosopher and sometime murderer, Paul Gautier, said to his sometime friend and combatant Charles Baudelaire, and began to draw a complex shape. He was using the oil crayons that he had filched from the box of a talentless painter on the Pont de Grenelle on the way over. The hack wouldn't miss them, and indeed their very absence was a triumph for beauty. Paul Gautier's own visions required birthing. The hack painter's children by contrast were stillborn. Lot of crudely drawn ladies sitting on benches. He did slightly better with pigeons, Paul thought. But these were few and far between in his paintings and were usually obscured by crude shadow.

Gautier was of the opinion that an inferior artist, an inferior intellect, best served as fodder for a true man of vision.

“Observe,” he said to a woozy Baudelaire on the other side of the café table and began to draw the *Shrivatsa* for him. On the back of the cafe menu, he did so with no concern for the property damage incurred. Should the establishment’s proprietor complain, Paul would with characteristic brio produce a Letter of Introduction. This he brandished more than the outlaw Jesse James brandished a pistol. He was famous for it in Paris:

Monsieur Paul Gautier, Sieur,
Metaphysician, Alienist, Brute

The sketch, when it was completed, looked like this:

With a curlicue flourish to several of the turns that eluded this re-telling as much as did, say, the color of the dust on M. Gautier’s boots held under the table.

According to Paul, this knot was a portentous symbol designated by certain Oriental races as an *Ashtamangala*. In particular, this *Shrivatsa* was the tattoo that Kalki, the avatar of Vishnu, would bear on his resplendent chest when he destroyed the world. This event was long overdue in Gautier’s

estimation. Nevertheless, the fact that it was nigh disturbed him to no end. For example, his erotic masterpiece based on Sade's *Philosophie Dans Le Boudoir*, was yet unfinished, languishing at the oak-bottom of his pickled brain. It would be the scandal of Paris should it ever be birthed, but with Kalki's imminent arrival into this world this possibility seemed deeply remote.

"The avatar comes on a white steed," Gautier announced and took a deep sip of the green liqueur in front of him on the iron table. Absinthe it was advertised as. Though Paul Gautier suspected it was of altogether more diabolical origins. The drink gave him monstrous visions just as it gave Baudelaire poetic cues. They were both nothing without it admittedly. They were slaves to the Green Fairy as it was served in this café'. The bottle that the absinthe came in identified the distiller of a Carpathian origin. It dulled the senses even as it stoked the imagination. It made one recall that one was another person entirely. One was never strictly only oneself. And occasionally one was not oneself at all.

Not an orientalist of any serious rank, Gautier was unsure about Kalki's quarrel with existence. Or how seemingly effortlessly he might affect this Apocalypse.

"He is a God of course," Paul said brandishing his absinthe spoon as if the point required illustration. "But even Gods are possessed of limitations. Even he who might kill with a thought would first need to conjure the thought and perhaps focus on it to the exclusion of all other thoughts."

But, to judge by the ancient tradition, and as far as Paul Gautier knew, it was Kalki's simple presence that actualized the World's end. Here was a being that birthed non-being as the end of one lever, that

once being raised, would automatically cause the other end to lower.

Kalki was a dreamer who dreamed the world. And when he woke the dream ended. Merely.

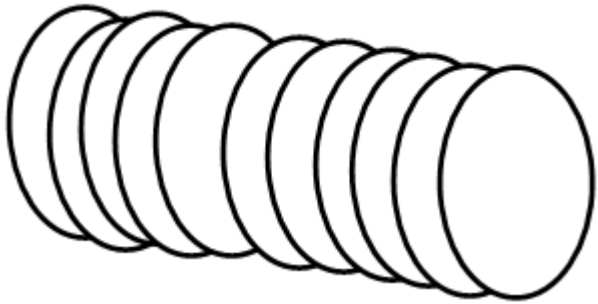
The symbolism of the Endless Knot being, Paul supposed, that all paths converged. And death and creation were different sides of the same coin.

“This is utter nonsense,” he said to Baudelaire. “Fantastical lies, carious illogic created for he whom ordinary fire is a cause for wonderment and genuflection. For there are no more two dissimilar attributes in creation than being and non-being,” M. Gautier said. “There is no pathway that may connect them tightly enough so that one may interpret that they are a single entity. Because all beings are in a way deathless. Just as the state of death is transitory. Not even the True Church with its library of superstitions would deny that claim. Christ of course— according to these dogmatists— was resurrected. But he was a special case. When the dead rise and float into the sky to be judged they will still be, in the present understanding of such rot, dead. No returning to the stage for them once the final calls are taken,” Paul said using a metaphor he knew his friend Charles appreciated. “It’s only a matter of simple logic. But the Oriental understanding of such matters is entirely ignorant of proof. They believe in the doctrine of *reincarnation*,” Paul said spitting the word out sideways. “That is, it is their understanding that all men have lived before, lived endlessly, in fact. From this point of view, we are informed that death is only a new beginning. And so, you see the Endless Knot of existence looping over and over. To a man in India, they are convinced of this truth,” Paul said. “Convinced that not a second before their birth they had died as another person, another creature perhaps, tainted by existence. And, so, they will

repeat endlessly until some process should interrupt them. It is the Asian Buddhist's notion that heaven is a release from existence. All existence, mind you, rather than a continuation of it. A sentiment you, Baudelaire, should find enchanting. You are the *poète maudit* of our age. You alone see the misery of life. Your heroism I think is found not in your artfulness but in your honesty. You have great plans for art as I have great plans for science. Thus, you are a man I can confide in absolutely. You understand the desperate situation that is life. You don't sugar-coat it. You don't look toward the idiocy of the academy poets for solace in describing a given situation. You tell it like it is. And, therefore, I believe you will understand all I've said and will say. You see reincarnation for the idiocy it is. But you like me are intrigued by the world's end. You see this Kalki myth for the idiocy it is, Baudelaire. But still you are intrigued by the notion that underwrites the idiocy. Which is that the world may end at a moment and none of us would be aware. Some might have protested this *denouement*, and some might have praised it. Regardless, we will all be unaware. Being will flip over to non-being irrevocably. There will be neither exclamation nor lamentation to consider in its aftermath. As the greatest attribute of non-being we will assume is silence."

Paul Gautier considered the words he had just spoken like a blacksmith considering his latest tea kettle.

"Allow me to elaborate, please," he said to Baudelaire and turned the menu over. There with one crayon he drew another figure this time using his awkward left hand:



He asked Baudelaire if he had ever seen anything like this before.

Charles Baudelaire, the great poet of France, had poor eyesight made ever more rheumy by a syphilis infection.

“Monsieur,” Baudelaire said to Paul, and refilled his absinthe glass, “it is not well-known to me how one thing may be like another. All things are unique, and their likeness derives only from the unfortunate tendency of men to forget their uniqueness. It is an absurd question I have just asked, in other words. It is a question that begs for a wrong answer and is disappointed when it merely receives a true one.”

Satisfied with the response, Paul Gautier took the menu in hand.

“The marks you see are not so much individual ellipses so much as a finite representation of an infinite whole,” Paul said. “That is, if I were allowed to, if my patience didn’t give out as the skin under a flagellant’s lash, I could draw these ovals past the earth’s orbit. It is an infinite sequence, I tell you. That sort of which neither can be drawn nor spoken about with the directness that true understanding gifts a speaker with. A clarity of language that mirrors a clarity of thought, so to speak. Here, I am afraid, it is utterly missing. We do not, you and I, understand this dark worm God under whose sway I have lately fallen. This creature has a single true

name that, if uttered, like that secret name of the God of Israel, would bring about a cataclysm on the speaker and his environs. It tasks me, nevertheless, with heralding its growing influence in human affairs. Very soon, even the great Baudelaire, the freest soul who has ever lived, will strain under its heinous yolk. Too long have men been free and squandered the freedom given to them. Soon they will reclaim their animal selves," Paul Gautier said. "Or have their animalism reclaimed for them. As well as the fear and indignities associated with that degraded state. In the hearts of men only there is one true master. Men will learn not to fetishize existence. They will in the rare lucid thoughts allotted to them curse the moment of their birth. They were born to slave, born to suffer and die. The great worm God will arrive with notification of man's damnation. Some like myself will find the arrival reassuring. We all have been alive too long, no? Seen too much and learned not enough. Death, the entering of final sleep, will be assumed by us as Heaven. And with the great God's entry we will be allowed to die, finally. Knowing that nothing good has been left behind us. We creatures of the shadow are ever jealous of the smiles of young girls on summer nights. We want to know their secrets, but they are incapable of explaining them to us. And so here it is: *La Comédie Humaine.* Balzac too would I am sure be one of us. Baudelaire, we stare at the prison of our existence through a gimlet eye. We are unmoved by the protests of the lovers of humanity."

Soon Paul Gautier announced that when this bottle of absinthe was consumed, they would drink another. The concoction was a hundred forty proof and filled with hallucinogenic substances. It was available only at this rive gauche café and chosen for its potency. He assumed Baudelaire would agree with the purchase. If not, he could go to hell. There

was no proper time in the day for becoming a raving drunk. That was mere middle-class propriety. A custom which Baudelaire of all men would find ludicrous. He was a new sort of man, one devoid of decency or sentiment. A truly great poet! France's first, Paul Gautier believed. In time, if the dark God allowed such an attribute to continue, his work would define the age. *L'âge decadent*. Gautier was entirely sure of this. He was, after all, a philosopher. He knew of what he spoke on such matters. There was not a fop in the salons of Paris who would challenge him on this opinion once offered. Everyone knew he was right.

In fact, Baudelaire had determined that this glass of milky absinthe presently warming in front of him would be his last of the afternoon. He had things to do apart from languishing in dimly lit cafes past midnight. These were not bourgeois errands so much as needful activities his decaying body had dictated that he perform if he wanted to remain vertical a little while longer. He had no choice but to cut himself off from the Green Fairy's company for the evening. He needed to be of sound mind when coming about his rounds later. He would need to negotiate, to maneuver around real enemies and cultivate the company of perceived friends. He would need to have his wits about him. He had no desire to martyr himself to the false God, Bacchus. He felt his own willfulness acutely and determined that such was the only will he would henceforth be subservient toward. Gautier and his dark worm God could go fuck themselves as a collective as far as Baudelaire was concerned. He had never heard of such nonsense until now.

Nor would Gautier's fearsome reputation in matters of conceptualizing a general depravity move him to comply with the philosopher's wishes.

“Monsieur, I believe you are quite able to kill another bottle of this green poison by yourself,” Charles Baudelaire said, slurring the first and last word. Owing perhaps to his aforementioned needfulness, the drink had hit Charles belatedly but hit him hard. Absinthe, and this brand of Carpathian absinthe in particular, had a pronounced hallucinogenic effect. The wormwood that was used in its dislocation was of a particular Transylvanian variety that when rolled into cigarettes and smoked gave one visions of the earth before men were present on it. Monstrous creatures roamed the planet according to various scientific societies. Also, birds with the wing spans of city blocks replete with teeth so sharp a single bite would do to sever a human limb completely. So, it was the popular myth that on the hillside where the plant was grown Elizabeth Bathory herself had deposited her bloodless victims to rot. Their offal had mired the earth irrevocably. This wormwood was now of a distinctly chthonian phylum. Even a single glass properly diluted and sweetened with sugar could produce nightmarish visions for hours whose figments would linger when normal consciousness returned, as dead man-o-wars washed upon a beach after some violent, oceanic occurrence:

My love, do you recall the object which we saw,
That fair, sweet, summer morn!
At a turn in the path a foul carcass
On a gravel strewn bed,

Its legs raised in the air, like a lustful woman,
Burning and dripping with poisons,
Displayed in a shameless, nonchalant way
Its belly, swollen with gases.

So were the first two stanzas of a poem he had just finished on the way over to the café'. In truth, all the corpses Baudelaire had ever laid eyes on had been of the pristine variety as prepared by undertakers at a wake. "At peace," as the cliché went. This vision, therefore, had been a vestigial effect of the café's absinthe. It was now real, simply because he, Baudelaire, had translated the thought-image into language. That was what art, poetry in particular, was: a holy alchemy purifying the ineffable so that it was fit for public consumption.

Gautier, in Baudelaire's opinion, knew nothing of this alchemy even as he praised him and his art with embarrassing extravagance.

"At heart you are a demonologist," he had said to Charles upon one occasion intending it as a high compliment. "The rest with you is extravagance."

Natural philosophy cut its own path through the world, Baudelaire thought, independent of men's desires. But Gautier wished to yolk the discipline into what amounted to a mystical practice, to focus its thrust less toward personal enlightenment and more towards social control. The king of the world when he finally emerged would surely be a demonologist and natural philosopher (or "scientist" as the English had started calling the discipline's practitioners) at once.

"You entrance not to cure, but to control," had been another sturdy observation of France's greatest poet concerning Paul Gautier. They were at their usual table in the same Left Bank café. In front of them was a blank-eyed urchin having recently been subjected to various mesmeric "passes" by Paul Gautier on a whim. Alas, the poor girl's soul had fled, perhaps for good. Presently a doll made flesh was in front of the pair, her strings having been cut but, nevertheless, strangely, a type of functionality was maintained. Gautier asked her a

question. Slowly an answer was provided. But Baudelaire was sure such responses were automatically generated, not from reasoned consideration so much as the controlling will of the mesmerist, M. Gautier.

Eventually Paul bid the urchin dance on the brickwork in front of the café. With an imagined beau in her arms, a waltz to silent music was initiated. To various onlookers the scene registered as exquisitely droll. Charles Baudelaire for himself saw the willfulness behind the display. For Paul Gautier, full control of others was the sovereign end of this mesmeric “science.” He was not a doctor with a compassionate frame of mind. He neither knew nor cared what secrets haunted a fragile mind. An individual might be cured through the elimination of his or her individuality. Paul thought this was a self-evident proposition. He saw nothing hypocritical with the notion of freedom through control.

Baudelaire had come to see that he too was the subject of Paul’s willful control. Perhaps not through mesmerism but through flattery and the plying of this potent drink. Absinthe was a controlling substance even as it liberated the artistic spirit. This was paradoxical to Baudelaire though not untrue. He didn’t understand how too much freedom could lead to enslavement. Or perhaps he understood so fully that he could not admit to the lesson learned. His body had been ravaged by syphilis and drink. Silently he appreciated the elusive virtue of moderation. He knew it was lost to him. Nothing better to do but lose oneself in delirium to hasten death. If he had a child, he would preach to it daily on the virtues of moderation. He didn’t care about his reputation as a reprobate. He didn’t care if his literary status suffered because of it. It was somewhat better to be alive than dead, no? If this

was the case, better to witness the occasional sober sunrise than live all one's moments as a slave to Bacchus. This was a bit of bourgeois wisdom he had studiously ignored. He might well have only a few months left to live. And it was entirely his fault that this was so.

The best that Baudelaire could do for himself was to try to focus his considerable imaginative powers on his poetic output. In this cause, too, he realized it paid to be abstemious occasionally. He realized that in this cause Paul Gautier was not merely a liability but an enemy. Thus, he must be held at arm's length if only so that his senses be recovered enough to formulate a cogent plan of action regarding merely staying alive.

"Gautier, if this worm god of yours should appear from whatever realm in which it is residing," Baudelaire said, "and drop in from a bank of clouds perhaps onto this Parisian street, would you as a self-admitted devotee remove your shirt and begin to whip yourself like the temple priests of old who believed blood was the only fitting tribute to their chosen deity?"

Gautier took an enormous sip of his latest absinthe glass before responding.

"Rather, monsieur, I would remove *your* shirt and begin a flagellation not witnessed since the Inquisition. The God I serve does not honor such self-abnegating displays. In front of It most likely self-abnegation would be cause for damnation. Rather, it requires displays of dominance and violation as tribute. You could take a beggar off the streets, for example, and bugger him bloody. The worm God would find this a type of suitable entertainment and spare your life. It is by basic nature a violent creature. Servility in its presence is the worst sort of apostacy. It is a lion set against

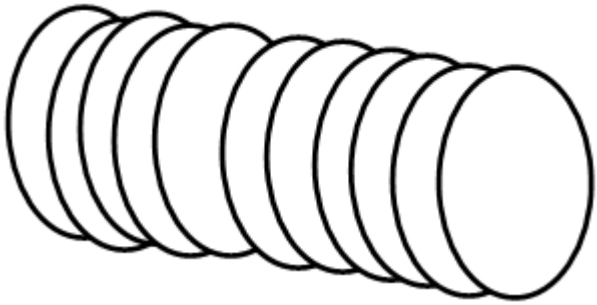
Christians. There is no need to give it a name as none would be accepted by it readily."

Rather than dismiss himself from Paul's presence politely, Baudelaire, as had become his common practice, simply turned his empty glass over and walked away. He strode with difficulty up this boulevard as he was quite drunk and experiencing visions on his vision's periphery. Hard to say if it was the absinthe at work or the syphilis finally affecting his brain. The lone doctor Baudelaire consulted on his condition prophesized that it would eventually spread to his brain. It didn't matter in the end. In that he had long since become indifferent toward the distinction between reality and inspired vision. Reality and inspired vision were brothers wrestling each other in the dust. There was no good finally that would come from one entity's ultimate triumph over the over. As Cain slew Able, or Able Cain. Charles Baudelaire could honor the outcome but not the moral distinction. Morality didn't matter to him, finally. He didn't understand the point to the Bible's stories. Even as a small child he was indifferent towards them. He didn't understand how such an immoral Creator could demand moral rectitude from his creations:

You said, "Listen now, and I will speak;
I will question you,
and you shall answer me."
My ears had heard of you
but now my eyes have seen you.
Therefore I despise myself
and repent in dust and ashes.

So went Job's reply to his Creator. To Baudelaire, this was self-abnegating nonsense. Job, he felt, had every right to question his Creator concerning the tortures he had been subjected to by Him. All

human dignity resided in the right to question. The Creator in the *Book of Job* was an unjust creator, Charles felt, worthy neither of veneration nor even fear. A Godly status was not required, after all, to mete out cruelty to an objectively helpless man. Just ask the gendarmes of the Sixth Arrondissement if this was so. Such gentleman as these would rather roll drunks by gas light than counsel their sober selves in the morning. Their bosses in the Luxembourg Palace were much worse than this. To them, French society was a treasure to be plundered. The ordinary jerk on the street had no opinion on the matter. They were as carrion to crows, actually. They were sustenance, nothing more.



Baudelaire would just assume worship one of these sniveling civil servants as worship the God of Abraham. If moved to passionate debate on the subject, he supposed he would resort to invective. He felt so strongly about what he had to say. It couldn’t be helped. But somehow it had never gotten to that point. Nobody was willing to debate him on the subject. His immediate circle was filled with like-minded souls. He had no acquaintances involved with religion at all.

Now, a sufferer like him might be expected to drop to his knees and beg God for salvation. For

himself, rather, Charles Baudelaire felt that God owed him an apology. He was neither thankful for the past nor fearful about the end. He assumed himself as a natural force buffeted this way and that by other natural forces and for no true purpose. God perhaps would call Baudelaire to judgment. But in Charles Baudelaire's eyes God was already judged. His punishment would be meted out impassively. He understood that nature had the upper hand. He understood that there was no true moral authority to turn to once a man's willfulness fled. Sickness usually was the cause of such fleeing. He merely wished the end would come quickly for him. He had no desire to be fretted over like a young consumptive in a horrid English romance.

Évolution, Valeurs, Usurpatoire, Lumière, Terreurs.

Here was a line of poetry Baudelaire spontaneously recalled when stepping gingerly over a particularly bloated horse corpse on a cobblestone corner. As soon as the line arose it was gone. As it made no sense to him. The dead horse's eyes were open. And Baudelaire fell into an annihilating thought after inspecting his reflection in them. The move from evolution to terror was now complete within him. He wondered if he had repeated the line three times over if the body would be reanimated. He felt it was a negative prayer. Something that shouldn't be spoken but must be. He had no choice in the matter. It's what all of society had been building up to since the space egg cracked a little and man crawled out of it to meet his fate.

The "doctor" Baudelaire had come to see just then in a building a block from the Sorbonne was one E. Meunier. He held similar theological views to

Charles. Baudelaire supposed this, though he had not polled him lately on the matter.

“My dear, you have the same pallor as one of my ‘night patients,’” Meunier told him. This was after seeing a bedraggled Baudelaire shuffle in through this warehouse’s back door. In truth, the half mile walk from the café had mastered Charles. He felt on the verge of passing out. Mostly it was the fault of the absinthe but not entirely. Baudelaire wouldn’t have been surprised if he had been on the verge of contracting tuberculosis. Daily he had become fatigued at the most inopportune moments. Dr. Meunier was something of a jackal. He couldn’t be counted on to show compassion when presented with an opportunity to exploit another man’s misery. He, like Baudelaire, was impoverished. He couldn’t be counted on to adhere to a Hippocratic Oath he had never taken and might not be inclined to honor it if he had.

Baudelaire was weak and Dr. Meunier rapacious. The corpses Meunier experimented upon were mostly stolen from local graveyards. Mimicking Baron Frankenstein, he had a scout who would identify those bodies interred without graveside mourners. He assumed these would be less susceptible to being discovered as missing via a bit of sloppily upturned earth.

Mostly ex-paupers these stiffs, orphans occasionally, and many consumptives.

Meunier was likely courting danger dissecting such corpses without protective equipment. But medical science, not to mention Meunier was presently too benighted to gauge the danger. He was digging his hands in the rotting goo without so much as cloth gloves. He believed, as with so many other enlightened men, that miasmatic “night air” was the cause of disease. Like M. Gautier, he had one foot in magic and the other in science. Or the

science he believed in was presently so underdeveloped as to not to distinguish itself from magic.

Unlike Paul Gautier, Dr. Meunier was entirely results oriented.

“A serum is as good as a magic potion to he who is in need,” Baudelaire recalled Meunier saying on many an occasion. Meunier’s cure for syphilis involved the chopping of then drying to brown powder bits of corpse livers. Dr. Meunier would then dilute the powder in distilled water and treat the water electrically. He would strain the mixture with a charcoal filter and reduce it once more to powder. Adding tincture of morphine, he would introduce tiny bits of his homemade medication into the patient’s nether regions by catheter. Meunier thought a nod’s as good as a wink to a blind man. He had no practical explanation of how the medicine worked but was thankfully never asked. He had never disguised his ignorance of the medical arts and saw no reason to do so when faced with the spectacle of a dying man in his care.

Nobody had ever died from the treatment, though once the glass catheter had broken off in a man’s urethra causing the man to faint in pain.

“I think the liver is the seat of the body’s restorative abilities,” he now volunteered to a supine Baudelaire once his trousers were removed. In Meunier’s warehouse eight tables were bolted to the floor. On each table was a former resident of a Parisian cemetery. In truth, Meunier acquired these bodies so cheaply he could afford to expand his practice. He merely required a large enough warehouse that would still allow him to work out of the public eye. The larger such facilities were, the more accessible they tended to be. And no one would look at his practice as anything but detestable. There was no real intellectual defense

for the desecration of graves. He wasn't after a cure for the clap. Merely, his liver treatment funded his deeper pursuits. Meunier was attempting to prove the existence of a human soul. He knew that it dwelt within the pituitary gland somewhere.

Once the glass catheter was inserted three inches into a given penis, Meunier's sage advice to his patient had been to remain as still as possible.

"I think you'll find," he said to Baudelaire absent-mindedly, "the elixir performing its work ably. The pain from urinating and the discharge might well disappear within a week. By the third treatment you'll consider yourself right as rain. Though this is likely a premature judgment. We have set the number of treatments at six," he said and picked up a scalpel. "Any less and the ailment might return. It is not a trifling matter, the Neapolitan Disease. Though, Baudelaire, you might have thought different months ago. Contrary to popular opinion, venereal disease always ends badly for those afflicted. There is no biological resistance accrued because of virtuous behavior. Neither does it simply go away on its own as a head cold might after growing bored with the afflicted."

In fact, the brilliant Meunier knew that the human pituitary was comprised of two glands: one visible and well known to many an anatomist and physician, the other entirely hidden and, at least while measured by common means, insubstantial, dwelling in a higher dimensional plane.

"Its peak is like the hump of a great whale," he said to Baudelaire of this tetrahedral gland. France's greatest poet only of late had been affected by this cure's morphine. It took time for it to rise above the absinthe and the other toxic sludge a life of dissipation brought. It knocked Baudelaire loopy temporarily, placing him in a somnambulistic trance. Meunier could have posited that the sun was a giant

egg and Baudelaire would have agreed. Soon he would be passed out completely. Thus, he would not notice his ersatz “doctor” rifling through his pants pockets in search of an extra gratuity. No worries if Charles missed whatever centimeme was stolen, Meunier’s intent was to deposit his patient’s unconscious form outside the alley so that he could claim Baudelaire was on his way home. He would speculate that Charles had been rolled for the money by street urchins. He thought it was a ready defense and who cared if it wasn’t? The man was nearly penniless anyway. Apart from a few random buttons, the only object Meunier had found on Charles’ person was a copy of the English dramatist’s John Webster’s *Duchess of Malfi*. Baudelaire, to judge by the copious notes made inside the margins, had an intention to translate the play but where was the money in that? Meunier could barely recall seeing the play while on holiday once in Highgate Garden. Perhaps he had hallucinated the whole thing. He recalled sodden murders abetted by a corrupt ruling class. This sounded like real life, didn’t it? Maybe he had been just sitting in a Soho café eating a cheese sandwich and witnessed a street scene. A whore’s bastard children were run through by a lecherous priest that kept his dagger hidden in a crucifix’s hollow. Perhaps he was a cardinal and had many such trinkets at his disposal. Didn’t much matter to Dr. Meunier. He had bigger fish to fry. Accordingly, he was required to weigh a body precisely to the very ounce before and after death. His theory of the tetrahedron pituitary was that its balance drained into the fourth dimension after death. Thus, the body was lightened slightly after its migration. The human soul was merely this appendage’s functioning within the astral plane. To Meunier, it was self-evident. But modern medicine tasked him

to prove it. He assumed Baudelaire's body would do as well as another. He assumed him a great artist and thus his tetrahedron pituitary or "soul" was overlarge and would after death account for a perceptible difference in weight once its fluid was emptied. In all candor, Meunier's liver cure likely hastened the end for a given syphilitic rather than cure him. Baudelaire was prized as a patient because he was nearly dead already. The doctor's toxic liver drink should have been the death blow for Charles but somehow the English drama had gotten in the way of his demise. He was hanging on despite the certainty of an agonizing death. He was still hopeful despite his wretched state. He was in league with the unfortunate Duchess of Malfi and her fourth act demise. Like her, he was a pure victim of circumstances. If she could survive, he could as well.

She was hard to kill apparently (though Meunier did not recall the exact manner of her death). Perhaps she would linger in another version of the play. Perhaps a multitude of endings existed for literary characters, just as they had for real people. The Duchess might not have died in the version Baudelaire had in mind. Perhaps she lived on as a simulacrum of herself. Perhaps this was what Baudelaire had been attempting with his translation, not so much a literal transcription of Webster as much as a new personalized version of the way the play should progress. He would rewrite the play as the play would rewrite him. The true version of *The Duchess of Malfi* would be lost for all time. Nobody would either remember or care to recall. In fiction there was no truth, only effects. Thus reality, which is our consciousness' fictionalized version of events, will eventually create new effects. This was every imaginative storyteller's power. Fiction supplanted God's Will immaculately. It had nothing to do with

fealty to nature (i.e., His creations). It had everything to do with vulgarizing the pretty things nature left in its bloody path. It alone of all the disciplines required no apology for being:

O, let us howl some heavy note,
Some deadly dogged howl,
Sounding, as from the threatening throat
Of beasts and fatal fowl!
As ravens, screech-owls, bulls, and bears,
We'll bell, and bawl our parts,
Till irksome noise have cloy'd your ears,
And corrasiv'd your hearts.
At last, whenas our quire wants breath,
Our bodies being blest,
We'll sing, like swans, to welcome death,
And die in love and rest.

When dissecting the brain of yet another disease-felled whore, Dr. Meunier held up the pituitary gland with a large tweezers.

To a besotted Baudelaire: “So it will be an honor, monsieur, to treat you thusly.”

The doctor stared at the pituitary in the candlelight while searching for a telling manifold. Eventually he discarded it in the gut bucket and moved on to the next specimen one table over.

Turn 13

In a tiny room overlooking a Tenderloin alley, a man considered his possibilities for transcendence.

“Observe,” the man, Hugo Schein, said to his captive, Dawn Hazeltine. He cut into one of her bound wrists with a carving knife. He wanted to watch the blood first fill then spill over the gulley of the wound. He thought the moment when the blood flowed to be all-important. He thought it a necessary first step to purify the body for transport to another dimension.

He wasn’t into transcendence for transcendence’s sake. In his vocation as a dark wizard, he had seen many an extra-dimensional landscape, witnessed the crumbling of civilizations older than the known universe. This was at the behest of beings so monstrous even he needed to be shielded from their sight lest he be driven insane immediately.

Many of these creatures had enormous tear-shaped ducts on their belly’s undersides that secreted a substance powerful enough to alter the reality in which it swam. The substance via peristalsis was pumped into the creatures’ mouths and the hollow fangs therein. This enabled them to dominate whole galaxies. They ruled nothing, only destroyed. They had a collective name, but the name was only on the lips of their victims.

Sometimes one of their ranks would assume human form. Perhaps having sensed Hugo's presence, they were wanting to taunt him. But if this was the case, Schein realized, he must be dead. He didn't think the dead had dreams, however. He didn't think a corpse considered the possibilities for transcendence to the scrupulous degree that was Hugo Schein's custom.

Hugo told Dawn Hazeltine that her bleeding meant that she was still alive.

"Eventually it stops and miracles happen," he said to his victim using the heavy German accent that had become an object of parody within this Tenderloin flop. "*Was durch einen geraden Weg nicht durch krumme Wege erreicht werden kann, wird nie gewonnen*."

Dying, Hugo thought, was an exalted state of flux when this mortal coil was shuffled off. While dying, one needed to be aware of one's own mortality, to feel what it was and witness its attempted flight from the world.

"The only true God is the God of change," Hugo said to Dawn and began to cut her in earnest. But Dawn, a petulant street kid, wasn't as terrified as Hugo might have hoped. He had found her at the downtown Greyhound terminal and invited her up to his room. Schein had thought terror was the second ingredient to achieving transcendence. The hideous God-things he had seen while strolling the astral plane fed on it seemingly. If they hadn't fed on it, they delighted in its presence. And it certainly was an object for tribute paid unto them.

Dawn didn't mind being cut open, she said, because she had been cut open before. And on several occasions by her own hand.

"You slice like a faggot," she said to Hugo of his knife-wielding skills. He was for all his Dark Art cred slightly squeamish.

“I know how it’s supposed to be done,” she said to him, “you dig the blade in a good inch and pull down. You try to hit an artery as you go. Like a plow into the earth. You try to end it all with a stroke. As opposed to what you’re doing now.”

Dawn spat in Hugo’s face. Hugo punched Dawn in the gut. Later he took her advice about how to cut a bitch open. He guessed at the placement of her right carotid artery and dug a deep C into the side of her neck with his knife and pulled downward. He stood back and watched her bleed out. He thought all that spurting blood would register with the dark god 0OOOOOOOOO as a tribute too spontaneous to be sincere. He assumed that he would require some demonstration of control over the blood for him to be exalted. He assumed the Old Gods knew the difference between evil intent and a crime of passion. Even Mormons spilled blood occasionally. Mere murder was insufficient in the eyes of the Great Corrupters. They required an element of cruelty in the sacrifice. The real tribute paid was the agony of the sacrificed apart from the fluids shed.

Next time around Hugo Schein would be more practiced in the art of inflicting pain. Presently there was Dawn’s bloody body to dispose of. The logistics of murder were proving unexpectedly difficult. Hugo Schein’s analytical skills always left something to be desired. He hadn’t realized there was a certain science to murder. He hadn’t realized one had to be smart as well as psychopathic if one was to advance serial killing beyond the status of a hobby.

Hugo Schein was a big dummy. Thus, the intense desire he experienced to transcend. No pop quizzes existed in the next life. He felt once the Great Change was made all his deficits would register as assets. He thought the Old Gods were contemptuous of intellects. He thought no slave

worth his salt ever questioned the circumstances of his enslavement. A blank mind was required and a strong back.

For now, he would see to the rotting meat in his room as best he could. Next time he swore he would be more careful and more discerning. He would learn how to kill with a knife easefully enough to bring a greater level of suffering into his victims' lives than he had with Dawn Hazeltine.

This was San Francisco in 1975. He felt no more out of place here than in Lovecraft's mythical City of the Damned. He understood the world was dying. He understood San Francisco was a place where the societal rot was on most prominent display.

City boosters would later claim the dark wizard Hugo Schein's activities as aberrant. But this was not the case. In the Tenderloin especially there was so much freakiness happening. A single cut-up body would not draw much attention, he supposed. The discovery wouldn't even make it into the next days' papers. Nobody gave a shit out here. They were free so they didn't care.

A lot of hard drugs out here, a lot of "liberation" devoid of moral strictures on display at the street level.

For all parties coming and going from Hugo's room life was essentially timeless. Many Tenderloin residents knew that the Vietnam War was over. But they couldn't tell you what year it was on a dare.

"Fuck it anyway," Schein said to himself when slipping briefly in Dawn Hazeltine's blood. Soon he set to cleaning the mess up. There was a pail and mop combo in a janitor's closet just down the hall. He figured he'd have to make three trips back and forth from the bathroom drain just to deal with the effluence. And then he'd have to find some way of dealing with the body proper.

He was no stranger to hard labor having survived as an orphan in post-war Germany mostly as an ad hoc apprentice in the effort to recover bodies from the rubble of his native Hamburg.

"*Es ist mein Schicksal*," he said to himself once the mop was in action and thought about next moves. He had seen the Hitchcock film *Rear Window* at a Hamburg cinematheque in 1955. He assumed the manner of corpse disposal documented therein was effective. There was a hardware store down the block that likely stocked hacksaws and garbage bags. It was no imposition on him to take out the trash like this. He could throw each double-wrapped bag out piecemeal over a series of days. Maybe he could take the subway straight to the Bay and dispose of them there. Maybe he would just dump the body in the alley outside and admit ignorance at its presence when the cops came calling.

Having migrated to the States in 1964, Hugo had by the 1970's assumed the nonchalant air of other city-dwelling Americans while pickling in violence.

"In West Germany, even a single murder's news," he told Dawn Hazeltine's corpse who had proven surprisingly agreeable companionship for him as he mopped. "Here men are freer. Thus, they are more violent. But the memory of my former years remains. I recall myself amid a crisis when so much as rolling a drunk in the Berlin tube. To me, the past is an attachment like a vestigial tail that one lacks the courage to simply amputate. But by days and weeks I grow free of it. America, not Germany, is where the devil will reappear, I believe this," he said. "The definition of strength I have learned is to be indifferent to one's past, dear. This is an American conceit. Not to learn from the past at all is to be a real American. To behave as if it happened to someone else."

. Every now and then, seemingly without cause, a panoply of bad memories would rise upon the bog of Hugo Schein's mind. During such moments he would cogitate upon his ill-spent youth in a war-ravaged Germany. He was deeply grateful to America for the oblivion it provided to him, and likely thousands of others like him. As objective historical memory was an overwhelming burden for so many.

In America, a man was free to re-invent, to completely fabricate. Nowadays if anybody asked after Hugo's hometown, he would claim a childhood spent in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He had actually lived in Milwaukee, Wisconsin for several months with a Bavarian relative in 1969 after New York got increasingly hairy for him. So, if they started quizzing him on the odd Milwaukee attraction, he would mostly have an answer for them.

In Milwaukee, a half mile from the lake, there was once an occult bookstore on Brady Street where the Black Pope's magnum opus *The Satanic Bible* had been offered for purchase.

"Feel free to steal it," the cheerful hippie chick behind the desk had told Hugo Schein when he presented it to her for purchase. At first, Hugo thought he was being put on. Eventually it became clear the hippie chick was dead serious. So, he put it under his arm and attempted to walk out with it.

"Stop thief!" the hippie chick had cried and walked over to Hugo. She removed the book from under his arm and placed it back on the display case. "Not like that, Herr Hitler," she said to Hugo. "Do you know what it means in this country 'to steal?'"

Grudgingly, Hugo Schein admitted that he did not.

"Don't take. *Steal*," she said to him as if addressing a four-year-old on the intricacies of toilet

use. “One’s a LaVeyan act, one’s just being obnoxious. You dig, Franz? Dig?”

Hugo Schein’s face slowly curled into a smile as languidly as smoke rising above an ashtray. “I dig,” he said to her softly. Then he punched her in the jaw as hard as he was able.

The girl fell back against the display, out cold, sending copies of *The Satanic Bible* sprawling around the tiny store. Schein picked up a copy and put it under the same arm he had put it under when he tried to walk out with it. Then he walked out with it.

It wouldn’t be until he had made it to *The Satanic Bible’s* second Satanic chapter “The Book of Lucifer,” that the philosophical underpinnings of what had just gone down in the bookstore had made itself clear to him:

“THE GOD YOU SAVE MAY BE YOURSELF: If man insists on externalizing his true self in the form of "God", then why fear his true self? In fearing "God", - why praise his true self? In praising "God", - why remain externalized from "God?" IN ORDER TO ENGAGE IN RITUAL AND RELIGIOUS CEREMONY IN HIS NAME?

Exactly so, Hugo Schein thought! Man created God and not the other way around. So, if you’re desirous of seeing the Lord, of looking into His dead gray eyes and asking why, then seek the face that made the Lord in the first place.

“And so, you see *Liebchen*, here we are,” he said to Dawn once he had gotten the hang of sawing into flesh and bone. Tricky it was, continuing through the mushy parts until a calcified bedrock was hit. Once through the bone a twist and pull method could be employed to complete the amputation. Just like a piece of cold chicken twisted off the bird once all

the blood was ignored. The procedure was something of a disappointment to him, really. He assumed there were specific anatomical differences between humans and other animals that would announce themselves loudly to Hugo once the process was underway.

He was bored with his work and recalled the real impetus behind emigrating to the States. The reason was theological primarily. He wanted to be free to worship himself in the way he saw fit. He wanted to form his own religion with him at its center.

A man could invent his own religion in five seconds.

“Just make sure it benefits you most and then you are on your way,” Hugo told Dawn’s corpse while *seig heiling* with her disembodied right arm.

In Hugo’s version, he was high priest and God head both. He became God through a studied iconoclasm. He sloughed off the yolk of tradition through constant acts of self-assertion. So, this was what he was doing here with Dawn. He had, he realized, an enormous way to go. He knew he had lost his shit with her and shown weakness. Once her body was disposed of, he would be back to square one. He was thirsty after transcendence. And he realized murder was a counter-productive way to achieve immortality. So much logistics were involved in a body’s disposal. He assumed he would be caught eventually if he kept trying it. He assumed eventually he would have to access the astral plane from a maximum-security jail cell.

Chucking the garbage bags over an industrial wharf one evening, Hugo Schein discovered to his great dismay that several of the bags were floating on the water’s surface.

“What other choice did I have but to jump in after them,” he said to Mary, Queen of Shots, a local

sex worker, when sitting on the windowsill of the aforementioned room a week later. The wharf water was disgusting. Its bottom was covered with the accrued filth expected of an urban environment, including cast off boat propellers. One of which had returned a ten-inch gash in Hugo's right leg. The wound had begun to suppurate lately. He feared he might have also contracted tetanus from the injury. He was thinking of checking himself into the emergency room because of it.

Such attentiveness to personal decay, he realized, was unbecoming. He was a dark wizard aspirant and thus unconcerned about matters related to physical well-being. He likely should have been impervious to this sort of accidental injury, at worst indifferent about it. No dark wizard had health insurance or so much as consulted a physician as far as he knew. But here he was, fretting over a boo-boo. To Hugo, it was one more sign that he wasn't yet ready to become a God. He had been building up to something for so many years over here. But now circumstances had set him backsliding. It was as if he had just stepped off the long flight from Hamburg to Chicago. Nothing had changed on the inside. And to him that's the only place where it mattered.

On Market Street in the Tenderloin, junkies used to parade up and down robotically from Turk Street to Jones Street inanimately, like the flat tin figures in the old Coleco Hockey game.

"They're ghosts basically still trapped in their impure flesh," Mary, Queen of Shots told Hugo Schein about these human dolls. Long ago, and for reasons unknown even to her, they crossed over and became such creatures. Occasionally, every so often, one of them would stop dead and stare off into the illimitable distance and Schein would

wonder why. To Mary there seemed to be a pattern to these movements.

“They have a master just like you,” she told him. “They have a set of tasks that they’re bound to complete.”

Hugo Schein wanted to peer through their eyes. He wanted to know if only for purely intellectual reasons if they were still human. Would murdering one of them be, in the eyes of some dispassionate judge, the same as, say, murdering America’s orange juice sipping sweetheart, Anita Bryant? Were these shadow people still sentient creatures, capable of rationalizing the agony of dying in tragic circumstances? Schein rather doubted it. But, then again, he had always been cynical regarding human potential. Over time he started to see the junkies of the Tenderloin as less than cattle. He thought it right that they should be exploited, emotionally and physically. He viewed them as so many natural resources. *Not* to exploit them would have amounted to sin in LaVeyan theology. For Anton Sander LaVey, sin amounted to the wasted opportunity to exploit. LaVey liked to fuck, he liked to bust his nut in both men and women. If he hadn’t disappeared from the universe suddenly in 1974, he surely would have been one of the first AIDS victims in America. He liked his cunt and asshole in more or less equal amounts. Anton LaVey didn’t give a fuck about categories. Never had even as a small boy. Randiness came naturally to him independent of feelings. Likely it was this driver that underwrote his desire to transgress. He wanted billions of sex slaves. He figured the best way to come upon them was to cultivate an infamy irresistible to so many.

Hugo Schein too wanted more, more, more of the pleasures of the flesh. But he was sick of haunting the strolls, the glory holes, bathhouses, massage parlors, peep show booths, and Chinese

apartments that would allow a confirmed bachelor like him to spill his seed fecklessly. He wanted sexual outlets far more immediate and cheaper. He thought a sex slave was a fine thing to own. Amongst the Tenderloin populace there were so many lost souls. Here he thought boy rape to be almost legal.

Obsessed as he was with acts aimed at establishing his own dominion, he was unaware of the exact point Mary, Queen of Shots had infiltrated his orbit.

“You gave me ten dollars once to eat my pussy,” Mary said to him on that rarest of occasions of a snowy day in the Queen City, “and I liked it so much I decided to tag along afterwards.”

It was a lame explanation. Also, as much as he could tell, it was factually untrue. Mary, Queen of Shots was a tulpa of some other stripper/whore who once in 1967 in a fog of amphetamines and flogging had achieved satori spontaneously. Mary, Queen of Shots was an unintended byproduct of this achievement.

She was a lesser being than even the average Tenderloin zombie. She was little more than a metaphysical contraption. Her intended purpose was to ape humanity, as humanity aped God. She was as empty inside as a patch of outer space. Apparently, this was the way she liked it.

She testified to her own condition readily enough. She was too much of the dullard to be ashamed of herself.

“I know I’m not real fundamentally,” she told Hugo Schein on one of the rare occasions that the conversation diverged from his God-like aspirations, “but most people are not real fundamentally either. They see themselves as something they are not. So, I have a leg up on the competition. In that at least I

know that I am not. Whereas most that are not believe that they are. You dig me?”

As she said this, Schein was in the midst of performing yet another blood sacrifice. A certain Nob Hill matron would mourn for her cocker spaniel once Hugo’s ministrations were complete. He had read blood was at its most potent when the sacrificed was at its most fearful. He was using a car battery and wires in the endeavor but burning himself in the attempt. He had thought about getting it over with. He wanted to slit the dog’s neck before he required medical attention.

He could feel the tetanus in his leg crawling up a nerve. A thick black substance like liquified tar was emanating from the wound. It stained the bandages that covered it. He thought any more sepsis and an amputation would be necessary. He felt himself an expert at amputation by now. He wondered if he had the balls to saw his own leg off.

As for the cocker spaniel, he didn’t have his heart in the creature’s torture. This was juvenile delinquent stuff at most. But it was the best he could do at the time, injured as he was.

“If I touch you with these wires,” Hugo told the dog in his accented English, “will you feel it now?”

Mary, Queen of Shots removed herself from the tiny chair in the corner and walked over to the room’s altar. Eventually she told him, “It depends what you mean by ‘feel it.’”

“Do you have a soul?” Hugo asked the dog. “Do you have bad dreams about all the shit you’ve seen down here thus far?”

According to Mary, Queen of Shots a soul was just the mind’s reflection off a shimmering surface.

“You dirty the mirror’s mind up a bit,” she said to him, “and ‘poof’ the soul is gone. Occasionally it reappears when the light is bright enough. And, by the way, even wild animals have nightmares. That

doesn’t make them beloved of God or whatever you’re trying to get at here.”

Mary, Queen of Shots was fascinated by Hugo Schein. This was because he was dead inside. He was looking for a substance to pour into the vacuum of his soul to form a poultice. She thought this absurd and self-defeating. It was like a dog chasing its tail. The spectacle was impossible to ignore.

“What do you want from this life anyway?” Mary, Queen of Shots asked him. Dressed in knee high go-go boots and a suede micro mini skirt, she would be considered quite fetching to a normal male. But no normal male existed here. For Schein, age fourteen was the cut off point for sexual attractiveness in either gender. This was the case even before encountering LaVey’s writings. Up until that time he had always been ashamed of such pedophiliac impulses and suppressed them. LaVeyian Satanism was like the lancing of a significantly infected zit. Its actualization brought more relief than exaltation. It provided a practitioner with an understanding of his present ignorance rather than genuine wisdom. It was a means to an end, simply.

Hugo did not consult *The Satanic Bible* as if it was some sacred precis on the commission of evil. One became evil merely when one forced one’s will upon the world. Evil was a subjective state devoid of real boundaries or definitive qualifications. The question that Mary, Queen of Shots was asking him was unanswerable, therefore. He wanted to experience life absent of expectation. He thought a truly diabolical person was one who existed without expectations about anything. As expectations assumed pre-conditions. Which was in turn the bedrock of moral discourse.

The answer he gave her was that he wanted to live as freely as possible for as long as possible. It

was a rote response, he thought. But for some reason she warmed to it.

She smiled and dabbed at her mighty afro that was casting a shadow on the room's filthy floor of a fully pregnant dandelion flour.

"Wanna ball?" she asked him and spread her legs.

"I'm not so into that," Hugo Schein told her and fussed with his blood altar. No Lovecraftian Cthulhu was going to descend upon San Fran all by itself, he knew. Schein realized he had a great deal of work to do to make it so. But he felt like a musician stripped of all musical competency presently. He was trying to play the most complex piece imaginable with fingers numbed by Novocain.

Mary moved towards him, and Hugo moved back. Eventually she commented on the strangeness of this scene as if it had just occurred to her.

"There are layers to everything," she told him. "Especially evil."

Hugo looked up from his efforts. "How do I proceed?" he asked her. He was genuinely curious after the place where he went astray.

Turn 14

According to Mary, Queen of Shots, the charred fragment of the worm God 0OOOOOOOOO existed in a fancy humidor in the People's Temple just south of Chinatown.

"You need to go there and imbibe," she said to Hugo minutes after the dog, as the poets say, gave up the ghost. "No, I'm not saying just a nibble around the edges like munching on a hors d'oeuvre," she said. "The worm God always was and always will be," she said. "It demands the greatest tribute possible. Even a slight hesitation on the part of one of its priests will cause that priest's instant destruction. You are food for it merely. You are a host that it requires absolute fealty from if you are to survive the joining with its parasitic avatar."

The humidor in question was the property of the People's Temple founder, the Reverend Jim Jones. He had acquired it through circumstances of which even he was uncertain. He had dreamt it once and then it had physically manifested. He held it as a relic of a lost relic and of no real monetary value. Eventually he would eat the whole thing in front of his congregation as either a show of his indominable will or his common touch. Whatever the occasion suited. He was flexible in that way. He thought himself above trifling matters of intellectual consistency.

He was called Father by his flock. Lately he had shifted from being the church's minister to becoming the object of its veneration, i.e., the Godhead.

"I am Father," said the Rev. Jim Jones to Hugo Schein when on the occasion of their meeting he was asked by Hugo for an honorific. Mary, Queen of Shots had arranged this get together by forging journalistic credentials for Hugo. *The Berlin Post* wasn't a real newspaper, she didn't think. She understood that the Reverend was deep down a hick from Indiana. Hugo's European intonation would impress Father surely. Hugo merely needed to clean himself up enough so that strangers didn't gag in his presence.

Mysteriously sympathetic to Schein, Mary the tulpa was trying to actualize his project of becoming God. She felt him in need of a mentor. More than anything, she felt he had needed that charred relic of 0OOOOOOOOOO. He needed to look upon it and wonder. Then, afterwards, he needed to swallow it whole. As evil just like good existed primarily within.

A VIP like the Rev. Jones having broad contacts amongst San Francisco's elite made him difficult to meet with, despite a forged continental journalist's credentials.

To actualize the get together, Mary, Queen of Shots needed to call in favors. Years back she had been instrumental in helping recruit many of Father's parishioners from the flotsam of the Tenderloin demimonde. Between then and now she had witnessed his transition from run-of-the-mill leftist theologian to a Marxist Sade. Presently Father administered justice and discipline to his congregation in equal amounts. He fancied the little girls and he lusted for the little boys. He was stoned half the day, but this was one of his better qualities. Even char-broiled, the noxious segment of

0OOOOOOOOOO had proved too charismatic for Father to ignore. Deep in his cocaine stupor he had discovered plots against him fomented by the CIA. The Jews were behind such activities, he was sure. And then there was the biggest conspiracy of all: that we exist. For this, the Skygod alone was to blame. And so, Father had supplanted it with himself. Now he was the object of constant worship. And would be until his assassination took place.

The Rev. answered only to “Father” at least while on Temple grounds. Off grounds he still had the San Francisco political hierarchy to deal with and even hip types like Councilman Willie Brown were made nervous by such a title. Father of *whom* Willie might say. And where were the lab tests? Willie had always thought the Rev. Jones to be one of the least racist white men he had ever known. But this did not mean he was inoculated from insanity entirely. Like a decadent French poet whose genius in perceiving unexpurgated truth made it impossible for him to live by the Golden Rule, Jim Jones must be judged entirely by his own categories. Willie Brown had detected Father’s type squatting on various rungs of history’s ladder. He didn’t see the Rev. as evil incarnate. He didn’t believe in such things as holy as God worms.

Father wouldn’t deny that he was differently wired (even though he had convinced himself that a good deal of this eccentricity was for show).

“I look at you,” he said to Schein from across his massive desk, “and see somebody in dire need of saving.”

Saving from boredom, perhaps, Schein was about to tell him but immediately caught himself. See, the original con he and Mary, Queen of Shots had designed for the occasion was for Schein to pose as a columnist from the *Worker’s World Daily*. He wanted to get Father to open up about his

immediate plans and the source of his power. He saw Jones as an evil wizard bent on global domination. He saw him as the rightful heir to Charles Manson, and perhaps even more menacing because of the organization he had built. Even Mayor Alioto wouldn't take Father on in public.

Hugo thought Jones destined for great things, at least from a LaVeyan Satanist perspective. In his view he had of late shed all the Biblical bullshit that (again from a LaVeyan Satanist perspective) had merely slowed him down. Presently when Father spoke of God to his congregation, he spoke of himself only. It was a switch that few in the Temple had seemed to notice. Maybe they had noticed but they were afraid to externalize their fear. Maybe it didn't matter much after a fashion if they had.

Schein wanted to get high with Jones then case the building. But he was having difficulty getting an initial toehold into this human mountain of shit. Father seemed utterly indifferent to Schein's presence as if he himself was a tulpa that could be disposed of on a whim.

Schein, who was posing as a journalist, should have rightly brought a series of prepared questions with him. Instead, he contented himself rearranging the pocket tape recorder that he placed on Father's desk and fidgeting with his poorly knotted tie.

"How long do you anticipate before the socialist uprising begins in earnest?" Hugo finally asked him.

Father was wearing those tinted aviator glasses that he would die wearing in a jungle bandstand four years later.

"Dependsssss," he said to Hugo slurring the S snake-like. "I mean," he said, "it's hard to motivate the American underclass nowadays. Too much television and ignorance gumming up the works, I believe. As the way things stand now, it's hard to shape them into a true worker's vanguard that I

think would be necessary, uhh necessary," he said, "to…to..." And then he trailed off.

Father stared at the floor as a dust poof worked its way across a plank. He then thought about ultimate oblivion.

Behind his aviator glasses Father had closed his eyes.

"I'm thinking about the universe's true nature, the way it is really," he told Hugo Schein.

In a rambling way he recalled this ultimate dark structure witnessed in a threnody. This was Thanatopses whose immediate manifestation was the supermassive black hole at the center of our galaxy, Sagittarius A*. But in 1975 there was no science to offer a rational referent for it. And if there had been, Father had long ago suspected science as a bourgeois distraction. Scientists after all, medical doctors in particular, had once accused slaves of possessing a disorder that made them want to run away. He wouldn't have sought out an astrophysicist's opinion even if there was one readily available. He didn't give a damn about what they called such a structure. He knew it was there independent of scientific verification. When super high, Father could reach out and touch the goddamn thing with his finger. It was ice cold to the touch. And it was smooth as emptiness itself.

He was stoned on something that produced a much deeper depressive effect than ordinary weed. It might have been a goofball, but likely it was something else. Nowadays, Father mainlined heroin rather than snorting it. So, this cause was far more likely.

He long ago realized that the rules didn't apply to him. Not anymore. He never considered matters of personal health nowadays. If only to prove himself worthy of the godhead, he ignored his

physical health. This was something he and Hugo Schein had in common.

Despite such stoicism in situations like these Father tended to make a fool of himself. Eventually his major-domo Gerry Lane would come to fetch him. The Temple's administrators were wary of journalists even from the *Worker's World Daily*. They felt indulging them was a necessary evil like obeying federal, state, and local laws.

Seeming to catch himself falling asleep, Father, for the briefest time, snapped wide awake.

"Who the hell are you?" he asked Hugo Schein. "And why is your skin that horrible shade of green?"

In fact, Schein's skin was translucent white. The green tint Father was detecting originated from the reflection of the office's shag pile carpet.

Leaning forward Schein asked Father questions designed to illicit specific responses concerning the Great Worm God, 0OOOOOOOOOO. He assumed only dark mystics like himself were even aware of its presence. He assumed, therefore, a political operative like Father had stumbled blindly onto the relic.

Hugo told Father he had heard the story of the Great Worm's destruction while attempting to storm the Heaven of the Nephites.

"Their God, Jehovah, is replete with fire-like properties," Schein said. "Supposedly there was a war in the next world. On this occasion 0OOOOOOOOOO was burnt. The earth itself was newly formed," he said. "And several of its remnants fell on new rock. Somewhere up north," he said, "small-charred fragments fell, somewhere on the Canadian Shield," he told him. As Father's eyes closed, Schein wondered aloud if this was old news to him. It seemed incongruous that a self-described socialist like Jones might have gone to the trouble to possess the relic. He knew so many other

dark wizards in San Francisco who would open their own wrists to possess it. But Father seemed indifferent about possessing it. He treated it like just another inane good luck charm along the lines of a four-leaf clover.

The gross appendage sat in his desk humidor for common perusal. It was a piece of memorabilia from Cuba, acquired during his Havana trip in 1967. The humidor was carved with various etchings intended to show the People's Revolutionary struggle against Capitalism. Lotta half-naked workers shown in silhouette with sickles in the air rather than at the base of sugar cane. It was iconography that even Father considered overly obvious. He much preferred the cohibas that came in the humidor.

Father would rather be fucked than sucked any day of the week. Though, he had to admit, all forms of sex became tedious once over-exposed to them.

"Heed my wisdom: not there, not there," Father said to a nameless interlocuter from smack Heaven as he slept in earnest. Perhaps Hugo Schein had exercised some manner of influence over him in this regard. Hugo thought he had developed magical abilities. He thought he could stare at people, rank strangers, and they would grow anxious in his presence. He didn't know what this form of telepathy was called as he wasn't a diligent student of the Dark Arts. Merely he knew he had this connection. He could see their souls curling up like armadillos when pressure was applied to them. He assumed it was his doing alone.

The humidor was unlocked, and the unholy relic was out in the open on a special shelf underneath the cohibas.

"He doesn't know what the fuck this is," Schein marveled as he examined the fragment from above. His first instinct had been to grab the whole box and run out with it. But sensing that the relic of

0OOOOOOOOOO would not be missed, he thought a subtler form of thievery was required.

To the uninitiated the piece looked like a dead butterfly gone black and brittle with rot. It had a distinct slightly rotten smell. But Schein assumed this was because he was attuned to its actuality. The non-initiated would note the slight smell and assume it having been carved from some tropical bit of wood. Somebody must have told Father about it at one point so that he would keep it around. He obviously attached no monetary value to it. He might well have thrown it away if and when all his cigars had dried up.

Reaching down to the humidor's lower shelf, Schein took the relic in hand. He immediately regretted the decision. At his touch tiny filaments emerged from the relic and penetrated his skin then underneath the flesh of his fingers. As it was impossible to remove, Schein ran out with it attached to him. He made it all the way to the alley before he began to scream. It felt like the filaments or tendrils or whatever they might be were penetrating down to the bones of his hand. Once there, they looped around the bones of the hand. Then pulled themselves ever deeper into his body. Schein began to feel tentacles extend from the corpus into his hand.

Evil never died, apparently. This piece of the Great Worm God that had apparently landed in Father's possession was still alive though in an inert state. Terrified by the experience, Hugo Schein's first instinct was to cut off his arm at the elbow. His molars had begun to grind as they were locked against each other. He was indifferent to remaining alive. Here was a pain that had shifting layers to it. Hugo didn't think he could survive the suffering much longer.

He ran home then located the hacksaw that he had used on Dawn the other day. He poured a bit of cheap vodka over the implement in a half-hearted attempt to sterilize it. Then he ran into the communal bathroom and leaned over the porcelain tub. His panic drove him forward as he felt the worm God's subcutaneous tentacles racing for his elbow joint. He felt he had about three minutes to amputate the arm and search out a tourniquet. He had a notion to simply squeeze down on the stump with the other arm and run into the street to hail a cab. At least in this scenario there was a path to survival. He felt there was nothing else to be done.

Now, even while hyper-motivated, sawing off your own fucking arm with a rusty hacksaw was no mean feat. For Schein, the project proved manageable until he hit bone. From then on, he lost any sense of what he was trying to do.

He had placed the blood-gushing arm on the tub's lip if only to gain better access to it. And so, he closed his eyes and began to fucking saw. His mouth was formed into an "o" and the eyes rolled back into his skull.

Didn't get all the way through, he didn't think, but he was now in full panic. He bent the splintered arm back and ignored the cracking of either the radius or ulna. The bloody, pulsating thing was hanging by several distended ligaments, so he twisted at the wrist mightily. Tearing through the skin on the other side was, believe it or not, the most painful part of the operation. The severed brachial artery was as, per the cliched image, pumping blood in fits and spurts. The discovery of a terrified junky's abandoned paraphernalia was an incredible stroke of luck for Hugo as he was able to use the thick rubber tube, he found there to tie the artery off.

Other residents of the flop were reacting lately to Schein's screams with screams of their own. Also, the pool of blood emerging from underneath the bathroom door was drawing negative attention. This drove Schein back into the bathroom where the sight of his own disembodied right hand perched on the toilet like a praying mantis and flexing its fingers drove him over the edge. Ordinary people, of which Schein, despite all his dabbling in black magic, was still a member, were not designed to bear witness to such sights. It often enough broke them, sending them into a state of constant hysteria. *Going nuts* so it was called in the common tongue. Though Schein internally had a term for it he had coined all on his own:

EEEEVVVUULLTTTTTT!!!

He didn't know what this meant precisely. But he knew it was his word. He flew through the aforementioned window overlooking the Tenderloin alley and landed headfirst onto the concrete with the same Looney Toons-like smack usually reserved for Wily E. Coyote when meeting with the ravine's bottom.

True story this, all of it. And rest assured, there was a certain community of Black Magik devotees who recite it almost as a doxology at every gathering.

They know which side their bread is buttered on, these devotees of darkness. For them it all had to be true.

Turn 15

In the tunnel that Jim Gleitz emerged from over the course of many centuries, there was a type of luminescent lichen growing.

“So bright in places I could almost read with it,” Gleitz, now a seven-year-old girl named Marta Willits, told her grandmother Hildegard. She was in the flat’s bathroom getting ready for school. Or at least she was pretending to get ready. In fact, she was trying her best to reconcile this reality with the former reality. The present reality was the dream of another person, obviously. Or the same person she was now, but in a different plotline of the spacetime continuum. Thus, a different physique, different emotional orientation, a different set of memories and so forth.

In the old reality Marta had newly emerged from a room where a man with a goldfish bowl in place of a heart had set her on her journey.

“They swam around each other like they were fighting,” she said to Hildegard through the bathroom door, “and the current they made with their bodies became the heartbeat. When one fish died the man would reach into his pocket and put another fish in. So, this is how I think he stayed alive

forever. All he needed to do was keep his goldfish. He never even had to change the water."

The man with a goldfish bowl for a heart had a bland, if pleasant face that Marta couldn't read at all.

"Putting me in mind of Herr Neurath, the man who used to live across the courtyard," Marta said in her precocious manner. "He would happen by each day, and we would have to be reintroduced. He put me in mind of no one. But somehow, he was a completely exceptional figure to me."

As she spoke, Marta wetted her fingers and moved them through her hair. Once her hair was straight, she considered herself finished.

Later at breakfast grandmama would come and apply a barrette in her hair. She felt this was the way other girls her age wore their hair in Vienna. She felt it would have been unfortunate for her to stand out.

Not since 1927 perhaps when the July **rEVULT** had taken place was it a good thing to stand out in this city.

"The police came and just opened fire," was how Marta's dear departed Uncle Gustave described the scene in front of the Palace of Justice. "They were going damned crazy, just like mad dogs," he said to Hildegard. "No, I don't know why it was, but it was," he said. "I can't tell you why they did what they did. I can't make it seem plausible when relating it even though it actually happened."

The power behind the police according to Uncle Gustave was a coalition of industrialists and that perpetrator of all things repressive, the Catholic Church.

"We did the best we could to fight them off," he said to his mother as she was bandaging the gash in his skull. "But when you have batons and your enemy has guns, who is likely to win? At a point, full

retreat becomes the only sane option. And we reached that point before the gathering started."

So, in Hildegard Willits' mind, this incident marked the beginning of the end of the Old, Good Vienna. In 1938, various right-wing forces were lapping at the shores of their upstanding socialist city. The best outcome now would be for Vienna to survive the gathering storm in Europe. There should be no talk of prospering, no talk of letting things go back to the way they once were until this storm passed. It could take five hundred years, or a thousand years according to the radio propaganda from Berlin. Hildegard didn't doubt that this was possible despite the unreliableness of the source. Just like the Shadow, she knew the evil that dwelt in the hearts of men. Somehow others doubted this to be so. She didn't understand such obliviousness and felt increasingly **rEVULT**ed by it. Many others had their heads in the sand. They were future cannon fodder merely. They didn't deserve to be called human at all.

Around Uncle Gustave's torn right trouser was a length of red thread that when pulled by Hildegarde had proven to be of infinite length. Thrift-conscious as she was, Hildegarde pulled several enormous spools worth of the stuff from the recesses of Gustave's trousers. Then she set out to weave a minimalist flag. The flag lacked all insignia or slogan. It was rather a color field of a red so shimmering it seemed to have emerged fresh from a vat of dye. Some looked at it and pronounced it the color of blood. Though, of course, blood came in several colors depending on its freshness and the physical state of the donor. In those succumbing to carbon monoxide poisoning, for example, blood was almost crimson-colored. In those having met their unfortunate end by hanging, it was an off shade of

maroon owing to it puddling at the feet for so long and having its hemoglobin molecules decay.

Presently in 1938, the flag was draped outside the flat's kitchen window, seeming a Bolshevik provocation to any fascist who might happen by.

Hildegarde wasn't so concerned about what Marta dreamt of as long as it was forgotten before sunrise.

"It marks you as somebody insane," she said to her granddaughter as she sat across from her at the kitchen table. Semmelin with butter today was the meal. It was absent any bacon simply because she had forgotten to buy bacon. If Marta should ask after the bacon, Hildegarde would tell her there was nothing to be concerned about. Items came and went from grandma's kitchen meaninglessly. It represented nothing more than an aging woman's inconsistent shopping habits.

Hildegarde thought the dreamlife was purposefully segregated to sleeping hours for a reason.

"If you think about what you saw while you are asleep, you'll lose your way in the day," she told Marta. "You see something and then have no idea if it's a dream. And so over time reality becomes the dream for you. You start reacting to things that aren't there," Hildegarde said. "And then the police come with the jacket that ties in the back."

According to Marta, this "dream" that she was recalling now was realer than what was taking place now.

"It's an awful thing to say to me," Hildegarde said and even though a vocal atheist, crossed herself.

"I'm sorry, but it's true," Marta said. She bit into her roll and chewed and swallowed before continuing.

“Think of it like this,” Marta said: “Reality is subject to change at any future point. Whereas some dreams are dreamt deep enough as to be eternal.

“It’s a symphony by whoever,” she said to Hildegarde, “by whoever you like. You will listen to it and declare that not a single note could be changed without the whole thing collapsing! Whereas the ordinary day to day happens at random. Don’t you agree, grandma? It doesn’t make sense because it’s not supposed to make sense. Life’s a pile of fragile cookware thrown up into the sky to see where it lands. Oh, this I have seen. There’s fragments all over. They stick on the bottom of my shoes when I come in after school. But only a fool would look at these pieces and declare just because they were once arranged in a certain pattern they must be glued back together.”

Of course, little Marta was not comparing herself to Mozart or Beethoven (or grandma’s favorite, Mahler). She, nevertheless, last night experienced a vision on par with the Ode to Joy.

“In it I was someone else,” she said, “A grown up man with violent proclivities. I don’t know why I was so angry. I never received the complete history. I didn’t believe anyone had hurt me to the point that I would seek revenge. I didn’t know why I felt the things I did.”

Individual consciousness, Marta Willits said, was by itself nothing. It could be abandoned or reclaimed at any point along a given lifeline. It was just a shadow cast by the mind, not illusory but contingent on physical processes. When these processes change, consciousness changes. There was nothing to it. There was no magic required for it at all.

“I had a distinct German name,” Marta told grandmama. “With distinct German feelings geared

towards matters of spiritual discovery. I was convinced that the world needed me, but I couldn't say how. But fate set me on a path. I couldn't turn back if I wanted to. And I didn't want to. I thought this was the way it was supposed to be. There was a tunnel, and I was meant to walk through it. I didn't question what fate had in store for me. Just as I do now, I assume I'm a part of something. It's absolutely no business of mine what it's supposed to mean."

She thought this man, Gleitz, once had dreams of his own. Some of these would be shared with little Marta eventually.

"He didn't make a distinction between waking life and sleeping life," she said to Hildegarde and asked for another semmelin. She said that Gleitz was indifferent to strange things happening all around him, accepting them as valid, as if in a dream. Therefore, it must be conjectured that she, Marta Willits, was in the midst of a dream now. There was nothing special, nothing privileged about this version of events. Just as once happened, Marta would wake into another place eventually. This place, Vienna in 1938, would seem a dream to her. She would walk through it willingly but always with the awareness that it was not sufficiently real for her to fret over its well-being. She didn't believe there was any fundamental reality. She didn't believe any one version of events was owed her allegiance.

Maybe there was a version of events that was owed her allegiance, but she was shielded from it. She was forever in a series of shifting realities like a comatose patient. She didn't think she would ever snap out of it. She didn't think God would ever stoop low enough from his throne in heaven and point out that which she should believe about him.

The waking life would eventually make itself known above the sleeping life; Marta supposed. It would do so because of the oppressiveness of the visions it presented.

“You trap a butterfly in a box and peer in to count its markings,” she said to her grandmother who seemed stricken with the information Marta was providing her. The words coming out of her granddaughter’s mouth were almost the same as her uncle Franz’s just prior to him going off the deep end. This happened in 1916. He denied reality then wrapped himself around his hallucinations as if they were multiple blankets staving off the cold. It went just like this, she thought: indifference to the truth followed by its wholesale rejection. Apart from the physical state of Franz’ mind, Hildegarde thought this was a deeply corrupt outlook. She had no confusion about what was real. It was all there in garish glory. One’s five senses were far too efficient in identifying them. That which was real was that which caused pain. Sometimes the pain persisted and sometimes not. Regardless, its actuality was unimpeachable. It was the place where either God or His vapid imprint dwelt. There was no confusing this realm with the realm of dreams. Just as there was no confusing a painting of salvation and the real thing.

On the radio that was piping through the wall from the adjacent flat, Austrian Chancellor Kurt Schuschnigg was calling for a plebiscite on the issue of unification with Germany.

“Hitler will never allow such a thing,” Hildegarde told herself and watched her granddaughter devour the reminder of her roll in a single bite. What would become of the damaged and frail under the Nazis? It was terrifying to contemplate. The most humane outcome for Marta would be for Hildegarde to suffocate her with a pillow in her sleep. She was

aware that she had no ability to go through with this. It was just a vague concept to her, as were all politics. They came from a different place than this Vienna neighborhood. They were both concerned with death's mechanics, detached from all ordinary human attachment.

Looking up from her empty dish, little Marta asked her grandmama after the identity of this Herr Hitler. Was he the mustachioed butcher down the way who wielded a cleaver with too much vigor for the comfort of many shoppers? At the last minute she decided it didn't matter. Events would reveal him more fully than any explanation could. Perhaps when the reveal came, she would be far away in another reality. Which was another way of saying that there was no such person as Herr Hitler. She, the dream's dreamer, created this reality with her perceptions alone. It didn't matter really what another person thought of Hitler. He would either appear to her or he wouldn't. If he didn't appear, his whole being would simply cease to be. She felt she had this power over things. Or rather that the universe had given her this power and now it was hers to do with what she would. She had no sense of regret in fulfilling any of her figment's stated desires. Her figments were subordinate to her. She knew they would understand. If they didn't understand, perhaps she would make them understand. Just as a butterfly with six spots could be willed into becoming a butterfly with eight spots immediately.

She thought people should know that they didn't matter. So many unhappy-looking people were on the streets nowadays! She thought she owed it to them to communicate the good news that they were irrelevant. She would perform a bit of magic in front of them, perhaps. She thought it was incumbent upon her to ease their suffering prior to their being

blotted out. This was the proper desire of all right-thinking souls.

Little Marta asked Hildegarde what was wrong.

“If you dawdle anymore,” Hildegarde told her, “You’ll be late for school.”

Ever since emerging from her dream, Marta didn’t care about school. But as it seemed important to her grandma, she decided to play along.

“I’ll have you know I’m at the top of my class.”

There was a package of American cigarettes in Hildegarde’s sweater pocket. She lit one while staring at an unannounced procession of military trucks up the Deckergasse.

“In your school,” Hildegarde told her, “They have neither tops nor bottoms. Not anymore. Not in any meaningful way.”

Marta put her plate into the sink. “Well, I’m the top,” she said. “They’ve made a new category for me!”

Hildegarde Willits was only fifty-three at the time of this conversation, but she seemed much older. At least to herself.

“Here’s a riddle for you,” her granddaughter said to Hildegarde, “that you can solve when you are feeling better. There is a certain animal whose middle has the same name as its front and back. What is this animal called?”

Hildegarde thought it was a child’s riddle and had an incongruous answer. So, she remained silent.

“No guesses? Mama?”

Compelled to answer because Marta was nearly out the door, Hildegarde briefly put down her smoke.

“An aardvark?”

“Aardvark!” Marta giggled at the name.

“What then? Or rather how many guesses do I get?”

“Look in the mirror and see for yourself,” she was told. And then with her schoolbooks in hand she ran to catch the trolley.

Turn 16

At school, the headmaster's head was wrapped in an overlarge white bandage.

The children all thought it was funny, principally because he was making sport of it. He said he was modelling his dress after Mr. Bela Lugosi in *The Mummy*. He said he was considering moving to Egypt where, he assured his students, they walked around in such headdress constantly.

It might well have been a religious dictate of Islam, for all he knew. He said he was thinking of studying Islam prior to his moving to Egypt. In Islam, he said, they pray five times daily. And this is the reason for such tight-fitting turbans. Being that they don't fall to the ground once kneeling to pray.

In the bandage's center there was a thin crescent of blood visible from Marta's desk up front. Marta thought to raise her hand and point out that the headmaster was bleeding under his turban. But on this occasion questions were not taken. The headmaster would have to discover the unfortunate truth by himself. His turban was pretty, Marta thought, but it might be irrevocably stained. She thought he should be made aware of what was taking place. It was common decency that this should be so. The headmaster's wife could take the

turban to the laundry and perhaps they could bleach it white. Or maybe it was not too late for the blood to be removed.

If you were to cut a worm in half, or at least some species therein, the two halves would wriggle away from each other until they grow the halves back. That at least was the proposal trying to be proven through experimentation at the biology demonstration Marta attended regularly just after lunch. For some reason, both worm halves were constantly dying rather than regenerating. The science lecturer, Adolphus Schnutt, was mystified as to the problem. He thought perhaps the batch of worms he was using was faulty.

Herr Schnutt was a barrel-chested man in a black wool suit. He was sweating profusely as he lectured the school's first form on the mysteries of nature. Speaking largely to six- and seven-year old's, he wanted to show them that it could be done. But instead of regeneration, both pieces of the worm shortly would turn a dark shade of red and become inert. Nothing was working as predicted by the textbook of natural philosophy he was reading from. The textbook noted the primitiveness of the species *lumbricus terrestris*. It noted that nature gifted truly backwards creatures with a form of magic to compensate for the wretchedness of their lives.

"You wouldn't simply survive in sugar water and good wishes alone," Schnutt said to one halved segment attempting to be good natured. Schnutt's pince-nez was sliding down his sweaty face routinely all the while. It was average temperature in here only. For some reason, Schnutt couldn't stop himself from perspiring.

He had a tendency of dropping lab equipment owing to the St. Vitus Dance acquired during childhood.

“I think we should all pray to see what happens,” Herr Schnutt told his charges and fumbled the textbook open in front of him. It advanced randomly from *Peculiarities of Lesser Species* to *Theories of the Mongrel Race*. Schnutt had given up on his worm operations by now. He cut and they, the pieces, wriggled around for several seconds and died. Perhaps there was material on his scalpel that was proving toxic to the animal flesh. Perhaps he wasn’t cutting in the right place even though he had committed the text to memory long ago.

In the Negroid race, according to the same text, the jaw was significantly pronounced in comparison to the skulls of Ancient Greeks.

When the demonstration was over, the children adjourned to the courtyard for a twenty-minute recess. It was there that Marta Willits became fulsome with suggestions as to how this failure of Herr Schnutt’s might have been averted.

“At home my grandmother has magic red thread,” she said to her friend Elsie, “and this thread amongst other things could be used to repair the damage done to these poor creatures by the Herr Doctor. You sew the pieces together and snip at the edges. Eventually they will heal by themselves. But the thread has to be magic,” she said. “To deal with the infiltration of death into the system, supernatural intervention is needed. For, you see, death is all around us. It infiltrates us like air. And there is nothing an ordinary bit of binding can do to counter its effects.”

According to Elsie, worms should be left to the domain of worms. They should not be used as experiments by a more advanced species.

“They don’t understand what’s happening to them,” Elsie claimed. “They don’t know what bad thing they’ve done to be punished in this manner. No, there is nothing from a worm a scientist can find

except that what was once alive can be made dead. Use them if you must but don't experiment with them," Elsie said. "It makes the killing all the viler in comparison," she said. "As if you are adding something when all the while you are doing is subtracting. It's immodest and un-Christian to do so. My mother says this is so exactly."

In the dream she was in the midst of now, Marta said, a man on a trolley had started sobbing spontaneously. He had to be carted off the carriage at the nearest stop.

"He knows what is coming for us all but there is nothing that can be done about it," she said to Elsie as an explanation. "Now, you see, that's truly a spectacular dire circumstance for a person to have to bear up to," she said. "You can see death advancing before you but there is nothing you can do to so much as roll out of the way and give yourself a slight respite! It's a dream as a bad dream, a nightmare that goes on forever. In true nightmares the realization that you are in a nightmare has vanished completely. And, so, you see the despair that descends, the true despair that descends when this reality becomes the one reality, absent of hope. Anything can be nightmarish when you are separated from hope," she said. "But you can only hope when you become aware that everything will change eventually."

Elsie should know that it was she, Marta Willits, who had stilled these worm segments of Herr Doctor's with her mind. She had cut their invisible strings so that they were incapable of the movement the experimenter desired for them.

"I don't think it's good anyway for men to believe they have such power," she told Elsie as to why she had done it. "He was trying to make himself out to be something he was not," she said of Herr Schnutt, "which was a true dark wizard rather

than a humble scientist. He could look in his silly textbook all he wanted for magic spells, but their incanting will never yield results. And, between you and me, I don't find him an especially trustworthy man. That suit of his seems proof to me he is trying to hide something. I think he knows more than he is letting on about certain things. Which is not much but there it is. No man should ever present himself as something he is not. Herr Schnutt is no dark wizard. I have seen many dark wizards in past and future versions of myself and I can tell you he is not one of these. The proof is that he reads from a textbook at all."

In the crack of the courtyard pavement, a shimmering object that attracted Elsie turned out to be a shell casing from a rifle fired off school grounds.

"It's pretty, isn't it?" Marta Willits said holding the shell casing up.

Elsie admitted that it was.

"Here," she said to her, "I'll pound it flat and make it into a broach for you."

Marta found a bit of cracked pavement and began her smithing. Soon the shell was flat and assumed the shape of a hydrogen bomb. This too Marta saw as meaningful even though the hydrogen bomb had not yet been invented. The other children gathered around her as she worked. She presented it to Elsie with a flourish and a request made in English: "have a blast."

Turn 17: Tightening Noose

A week later the Germans crossed the border.

This was the start of the Anschluss. Which could be translated as *the joining*.

The caravan of German trucks and tanks surged into Vienna hours after the red anarchist flag of Hildegarde Willits had been hidden with the linen.

She had tried to burn the flag in the sink. But it would not burn, it being made of magic thread. She had thought to throw the flag away, but she was too distrustful of the neighbors to allow it to sit out in the trash for open inspection. There were rats everywhere in this city, before and after the German arrival.

Instead, Hildegarde folded the flag in four and put it in her linen closet.

“If anybody asks you for its purpose, you say it’s a spread for a table,” Hildegarde told her touched grandchild, Marta, when the news from the border was first broadcast. She was speaking in a deliberate manner that belied her anxiety. She didn’t want Marta to assume the worst. She thought Marta needed to be shielded from the new reality.

Of course, this was impossible. But she thought it needed to happen regardless.

In this building there was an attic that she thought possessed utility in this fight.

“It’s beautiful like death,” Marta said to her grandma when seeing the army’s black procession enter from the north.

Hildegarde’s original impulse had been to board up the windows and seek refuge in an interior room. But then she thought playing along might be the best course, at least temporarily. She could see neighbors out with their Nazi flags tossing flowers over the balustrade. She thought that in the face of evil it was best to smile and make plans. Martyrdom was easy, after all. It could be done in a carefree manner. The trick was to fight and win. To accomplish more than mere martyrdom or survive like an animal, cunning was required. Presently the Germans were far too strong. They tended to look at self-sacrifice as a sign of weakness. Suicide might well have encouraged the SOB’s. They would have thought maybe one more defective was out of the way.

Marta told Hildegarde the procession reminded her of a great black snake uncoiling and emerging from a swamp.

“Did you dream of such a thing, too?” she asked Marta, recalling their conversation of last week.

“No, but if I did, I wouldn’t mention it to you,” she told her grandma.

“Child, why is that?”

“It’s too upsetting for you. To see the old world burn in this way. And a new cruel world emerge from its corpse! What good does it do anyway to tell the truth? The Nazis don’t know the truth any more than you do. They want to be flattered merely. They want to be told that what is true is only absolutely true. And the dreams they remember are only those

in which they play hero. They don't see that they've already killed themselves just by choosing to remain alive."

With all sincerity Marta Willits told her grandma that she better go to the store for more cigarettes as these would already be in short supply.

"The krauts they love the American smokes," Marta said and walked off to the living room. "And they want to conquer England. They're invading Austria to suck it dry. For their war machine. They could care less about their greater Germania talk and their *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. They succeed in the short term because they're aware of a simple truth. When others sleep and dream, they wake and strive. But striving absent of dreams won't last forever. Very soon, I'm afraid, you'll be devoid of the urge to smoke for good."

"*Krauts*," Hildegarde said and wondered after this single made up word. In a manual of mental illness this was known as a neologism, a newly coined expression that emerged from the mouths of the unwell trippingly. The insane were generally as ignorant of the words' meaning as their interlocuters. Therefore, she resolved not to ask Marta. There could be no satisfactory answer given in reply.

Hildegarde Willits thought that little Marta was truly a dangerous person and would just assume turn her grandmama into the Nazis for wholly imaginary crimes.

"Is there a place for someone like you?" she said to her watching her fetch her drawing pens from the holder the school gave her. "If so, where would it be? It surely cannot come down to this, a case of you versus the rest of us. Because I will protect you no matter what," she said. "Even if it costs me my life, I will protect you. And you will grow to adulthood and not remember me at all."

Hildegarde thought this eventuality supremely despicable of the fates. She would say so to them in a private moment. Now in Marta's presence she was afraid to say anything. Most Austrians had not yet learned to fear their children. The Hitler Youth banners had not yet been hung from windowsills in place of the Badenberg triband. The broadcasts from Berlin had not yet replaced the local music hour completely.

The heart-shape that Marta was drawing presently was black as soot and seemingly overlarge.

"Who's that supposed to be for?" grandma asked her and listened for the sound of howitzer fire. She thought anything was possible now that the country was fucked. To her a real war would come as a relief. In that it was a normal situation for humans to endure. This was opposed to the Anschluss which was dark and conspiratorial and from another realm altogether.

Intent on getting the drawing right, likely Marta ignored the question.

Soon Hildegarde was forced to remove the pen from her granddaughter's hand.

"I'm going out," she told her. "Lock the door behind me."

Smiling, Marta Willits walked behind grandmama until she was outside in the hall.

"Goodbye for now," she said to Hildegarde and locked the door. For a while, they both kept still and stared at the impediment between them. Then one of them moved first and that was that. They had nothing to say to each other anymore.

Turn 18

The paper of the large black heart Marta had drawn that day became over time rumpled and diffuse. Somehow the heart itself remained pristine. It didn't seem subject to degradation. It seemed at such times barely part of the world.

This was in the winter of 1939 when the occupation had been ongoing for a year.

"I'll show you all now my reason for being," Marta Willits said to her schoolmates once in the Language Arts classroom. The heat had inexplicably failed and there was a pause in the lecture schedule. Herr Singerath, who from a certain angle bore a close facial resemblance to his dachshund, Aristotle, was bent over the classroom's radiator attempting to bleed a radiator pipe. Surely the fault for the lack of heat in this room must reside in the building's inner plumbing. Austrians weren't allowed to question if that was the cause. But you were considered a good German by the new Bavarian headmaster if this was what your actions assumed. You couldn't imply anything was wrong beyond your own little plot of land. You couldn't imply that the lord of the manor was fucking things up big time.

Thus, *mein herr* was in no great hurry to bleed the pipe. If he did and it didn't work that would raise

a series of questions that he had been trying to avoid. While he was investigating, he felt in no danger. In truth, the best course of action might have been to deny his charges that there was anything wrong with the heat. But then there was the explanation required as to why the children could see their breath indoors. It was an impossible situation for him, a lowly instructor. Singerath didn't want to be conscripted. He didn't want to go to Poland and smack some luckless Goral in the face simply because he wasn't a good fighter. He was in despair of late like so many about Austria. Like so many Austrians, he saw no way out.

For minutes on end, he lay on the classroom floor inactive. His students had long since stopped paying attention to him which gave him the luxury of lollygagging. Thank God for little Marta! She alone had the charm nowadays to distract her fellow students from the miserable conditions. She proceeded as if shivering in a freezing building was a perfectly normal occurrence. And then there was the subject of her strange digressions that normal children did not have. She seemed confident that the Germans would not remain in Austria forever. She also claimed a great war was on its way but on this last point even little Aristotle could have rightly affirmed. It was all in the news about what was happening to Europe.

She had drawn a black heart with what looked to have been the most stygian of inks. There was red gilt on the heart's exterior and near the heart's center was a perfect white keyhole. Little Marta claimed that it had grown there over time like a tumor. She claimed neither she nor any other artist had thought to create a key for the heart. It would have been presumptuous of an ordinary person, she said. And besides no ordinary person would ever

know how large or what shape to have formed it into.

Upon hearing this, even the unflappable Singerath was incredulous.

“Excuse the presumptuousness. But Miss- “

“To every heart there is a key and a keyhole,” Marta told her teacher matter-of-factly. “But only the hearts with the keys fitting the holes will be unlocked. It doesn’t make any sense to guess, sir. Because you are bereft of the key to this heart. I made it myself, Herr Doctor,” she said. “It doesn’t matter what you think it might look like or the way you want it to be.”

Singerath wasn’t going to argue with her on this point or any other. Marta was a godsend as far as he was concerned, a presence floating above politics and material concern. She would rise to become Empress of the Earth, he predicted, if eventually there was an earth to reign over. Even now the British navy was under siege according to whatever trickle of unofficial news made its way into Vienna. For England it was only a matter of time. As with the Poles. If there had been partisans to join with in Austria, Herr Singerath and Aristotle would have joined already. At some point both the men and dogs of Austria would do their bit for freedom, he was sure. He didn’t know when that moment would come. So, it was his duty to keep looking out for it. When he came, he would pounce as his frisky ratter pounced on a mouse in his tiny vegetable garden out front.

What attracted him most about the drawn heart was its impenetrable shade of black.

It seemed almost hypnotically dark to Singerath, as if it wasn’t so much a drawing as a portal. He thought if a fly landed on the heart’s surface the fly would immediately disappear from the universe. It was dark enough to bend light near its surface. As if

a blot on the world itself. As if God had overlooked this one spot and forgot to fill it in with creation.

He had, upon first seeing it, remarked on the heart's shading.

"Thanatosis! That object which the last creature alive in the universe will see," Marta Willits told her teacher absently and fiddled with her hair. "It's a structure that resides in deep space, the remnant of a great star," she said. "The field equations for General Relativity prove that it is so."

The standard Nazi line regarding Einstein's great theory was that the Jew had plagiarized it. And it was likely incorrect anyway.

Singerath told her she was obviously misunderstanding something she had overheard on the radio. She had told him she misunderstood nothing. This was her blessing and her curse.

"Besides," she said, "you can see it for yourself. That no person let alone a little girl can draw such a profound shade of darkness. How could this be done otherwise?" she said. "It's a complete absence of anything. It's not mere masking. In a way, the heart has always been here. I made the stencil only. I only pointed out the heart was there in the first place."

Recalling the conversation now, Singerath marveled at how drastically society had changed within a year. This was pure impudence on Marta's part. Prior to the Anschluss, it would have been met with a caning at least. Presently Singerath had just smiled and walked away. In a culture devoid of democratic values, adults were always afraid of children. This was the mark of a monstrous society: when civil authority was subordinated to the will of the mob. He had no idea what Marta was talking about but simply deferred to her as if he was the student standing uncomprehendingly in front of a teacher. Everything had been turned upside down. There was an air of comedy to it like in the outset of

a nightmare when the gathering strangeness seemed like a lighthearted play. It seemed like a system designed to dispirit and degrade. Maybe only brats like Marta could enjoy its fruits fully. Suddenly she seemed in full flower as if she had wandered into a magical land like Dorothy in the American film.

It couldn't sustain itself, Singerath didn't think, because it was absurd. Given time the old ways would reapply regardless of if the Nazis were still in charge. Marta would be taken over the headmaster's knee and beaten. There was no excuse for such impudence. Even dogs, Singerath thought, were obliged to be well-behaved when apart from their masters. He thought she was due a comeuppance. He only hoped to live long enough to see it happen.

Lying on his side, Herr Singerath saw the world from a cock-eyed perspective.

"It's here, it's true, it's the backing paper of the world curled up into the light of day," Marta said to her schoolmates and held the heart above her head. Like an ikon in an orthodox church, she bore it aloft in the hands of a priest making his way to the altar. On the street outside, the incessant rumbling of military caravans had lately restarted. Coming or going? Singerath had lately blurred the distinction in his mind.

He thought, what was the point in paying attention anymore? To anything.

Turn 19

By 1940, consecutive murders of blood-tipped crows began appearing from the northeast. Mysteriously they landed on the tiny platz just outside the Willits' apartment building.

"The Hungarians are preparing for war across the Danube," Marta Willits told her grandmother Hildegarde when the subject was raised. They were strolling in the platz, executing circuit after circuit while keeping their backs facing a wall. In Vienna in 1940, this tactic was learned through simple observation. In this society opening yourself to an attack from behind was supremely provocative. One needed to take care as one needed to demonstrate fear. An attitude of obliviousness was reserved for the likes of the SS solely. One needed to know one's place always. Or at the very least one needed to act like one knew. It was a prisoner's demeanor that one adopted unconsciously. One never made eye contact with a stranger nowadays. In public, one never gave the impression that there was anything on one's mind besides the next step taken.

Nowadays there was little else to do in Vienna except walk in circles. All the cinemas had long since instituted a seating policy of soldier-first. Presently they exclusively featured a run of

execrable kraut propaganda. There was too much Leni Riefenstahl and too much *Jud Süß* to tolerate without shouting in protest. The average Austrian mind, Hildegarde Willits believed, was geared to fascism and Jew-hate naturally. They didn't need prompting from their Nazi overlords on this account. Such filmic propaganda was overkill and deeply unpleasant to witness. Hildegarde had always thought the cinema was a type of church. And now the church was defiled. Nothing to do but rebuild later. But who knew how long that would be? Little Marta likely knew when, or she thought she did. But Hildegarde Willits was too frightened to ask. Doubtless she would receive a clear answer. But then there would be the aftermath to deal with. She would lie awake for days wondering if her beloved granddaughter would rat her out to the cops.

The blue bandanna around Marta's neck was not quite the accoutrement of the Hitler Youth, but some weak tea Austrian analog. She never understood what it was supposed to refer to. Something to do with Wilhelm the First or maybe Frederick the Great. There was once a greater Austria, you see, and now that Austria was no more. The Reich wanted to make good Germans out of the Viennese without realizing in advance that this was impossible. The city was too cosmopolitan and modern to ever be made into a "good" anything. Then again, do not underestimate the German will. Freud had long since fled to London. Mahler long dead. There likely were not any great Viennese left. But that did not mean there were no good Viennese. Hildegarde Willits was convinced an armed insurrection was a single incident away. She was likely wrong about that but that was what she believed.

She had no idea how Marta was so well-versed about events east of the Danube. On the other

hand, when in the grip of a news blackout, any conjecture was relevant and needed to be respected as semi-journalistic.

“Who are they planning to go to war with, dear?” Hildegarde asked Marta.

“Yugoslavia, of course,” Marta said. “With them it’s always Yugoslavia. And the Serbs, in particular. They need to strike out at the *untermenschen*. They need to wipe the unclean ones away.”

In the platz much of the brickwork was chipped or shattered. Marta was using each imperfection as a marker for a game.

“You take baby steps until you come to a crack and then you twirl around,” she said demonstrating for her grandma. “And by the third time you need to do it without looking down. But if you step on a crack, oblivion happens,” she said. “You are condemned and need to start over. And each time you feel the cracks grow wider until it is impossible to jump them. And you fall in.”

She said this in an ordinary way that suggested she did not consider such an eventuality the worst outcome possible.

“When you fall inside one of these,” she said. “You fall forever. Or maybe fall into a new reality. You are one person and then another. You forget who you were a second ago. Which is in a way the same as falling forever. You are never any one person at any one time. It’s too bad but the mistake is yours. You should have memorized the patterns in the brick. You should have known the dangers. You should have learned where to step beforehand without looking at it. It was a serious game you were engaged in before you lost. It is your fault that you lost. And so, you fall forever just like a person falling into a gravity well. Once in a black hole, your motion is constant and one-directional. It is not for any of us to criticize the way God made the

universe. No, we cannot see the plan. But this doesn't mean that it is not there."

The shadow of an SS officer on the roof of a building across the way came between Marta and her grandmama temporarily.

"What you see before me is nothing more than a shadow of a larger whole," she said. "Behold," she said and then pointed straight down. "The bricks were once solid against each other, held in place with mortar. Two years from now they will be in an even more dilapidated state than they are now. They are in no way connected to their former selves any more than you are connected now to your former self."

Marta wanted to take a walk to Schönbrunn to see the gardens once again. Cold as it was outside, Hildegarde resisted, but Marta was insistent. She said they were running out of time to do so though her grandmother was unaware of why this was the case. The gardens seemed eternal to her. Or as eternal as an ordinary human could conceive it. Say, a hundred years. To the best of her knowledge, they would be there in two months when the weather was warmer. She hadn't heard any rumors about the Germans taking them away. Maybe this was what Marta was referring to all along when she demanded to be taken there. The krauts were planning on taking the contents of Schönbrunn to the eastern front perhaps as a morale-building exercise. The soldiers were lonely after the glories of Germania while on the savage edges of Russia maybe. They were requiring a little wiener schnitzel or even sugar beer. This was all Austrian kitsch, but your average German ate it up apparently. They looked at the country as an annex to the Fatherland.

On the other hand, Marta Willits seemed indifferent to the present political situation.

“It’s been so long since I’ve had a look at it,” she said to her caretaker when asked. “The cold will keep some of the *Spielzeugsoldaten* at bay,” she said using the local derogatory term for the German soldiers. Neither she nor her grandmother wanted their ilk milling around with them. It distracted from the local beauty, especially when the soldiers brought their lugers with them. It was tacky, moreover, as they tended to overcompensate for the obtrusiveness of their presence by lingering over an ordinary bush.

Marta told Hildegarde that she wanted to walk around the gardens for a little while then come back and drink hot cocoa.

“If there is no cocoa, grandma, then I will drink tea,” Marta said and looked up the street to see if the trolley was still parked on the corner. She didn’t understand why at certain times of the day the trolley refused to run. The conductor was a good Austrian, she thought: one dedicated to keeping up appearances. She didn’t understand why, just for his own well-being, he wouldn’t go to work. He should smile as the Huns boarded his trolley and waved their pistols around. Now that Paris was under their thumb, they would surely flock there for their leave. They would pass on venereal disease to all the compliant whores there. Marta couldn’t wait until these overbearing oafs left. But just because they were there didn’t mean that life did not go on.

More to the point, people needed to be transported. She didn’t mind walking, but it irked her that she had no choice.

Once she and grandma strolled past the trolley, they saw the conductor straight-backed staring into space at his control box. One hand was on the accelerator and the other was holding a hand-rolled cigarette. Maybe he was contemplating some action relating to his job. To Hildegarde, he seemed at the

point of shedding tears. But Marta didn't see it that way.

"He's trapped between personas, merely, neither in one segment of his worm or the other," she told her grandmother as an explanation. "Eventually he'll migrate to the next segment," she said, "and then he'll be able to take action. For now, he's stuck outside the moment. He looks at us all and sees exactly nothing. And if you point this out to him, he'll claim that it is you who have gone mad and do not see properly."

A sign in the front window of the trolley explained that the trolley car was idle. The sign was only half attached to the hook it was supposed to be hanging from.

"Once he progresses," she said to Hildegarde of the conductor, "he'll have all sort of options at his discretion. He might even be the man to end this all," she said. "It's impossible to say from the outside. He is of his worm and the worm goes where it likes. As it is impossible to tell where the next segment will be placed. From the outside it's impossible. Perhaps to him it's obvious. But everybody else will be surprised."

Hildegarde wondered if in such an environment as this the conductor would be allowed to progress.

"I seen this before, the SS comes and beats the crap out of stragglers," she said. "They don't see after motives with those that they're oppressing. All the talk of respect is engaged in to hide the truth. They're here to rape Austria, not bring it into the fold. And somebody like him standing there when he is supposed to be transporting will be taken as an act of defiance. It can't help but be taken as defiance. Even by a junior officer. I've seen what goes on around here. An ordinary citizen has no rights at all. You're asked firmly to do something, and they don't ask again. They'd rather beat you

than reason with you. And, therefore, they rape. They rape, they do not protect. But you must never repeat what I've just said to you. Because, child, remember, you must remember…"

"That you could kill me far more quickly than they could kill you?" Marta said. "I know, madam, I surely know!"

Marta smiled broadly and took her grandmother's hand. This was the first outward display of affection Marta had demonstrated since that strange morning in '38 when everything changed for her. It couldn't be that she was growing into affection. More likely, she was complimenting her for a job well done. She had finally started to see the world as it truly was.

She thought it was funny that Hildegarde, an adult, would take so long to arrive at a conclusion that Marta, a child, had realized instinctively.

"You can see how horrible Vienna's gotten in the last few years, but still you believe it's all superficial and will someday snap back to its pre-war state," Marta said to Hildegarde. "But it won't snap back. It's not a person like a headmaster who will recover his senses after a long period of bitterness towards life. No, we don't hold out hope for any society after it has embraced insanity. But you look at it every now and again and believe you see signs of return. It's all in your head, grandmama, absolutely. Of course! But you can't for the life of you shake the habit of seeing things the way they once were. It's a form of temporary insanity like hysterical blindness. And something that you need to overcome."

As she talked, Marta skipped lightly over each crack in the pavement continuing her game.

"Better to have future sight and see things the way they might be than as the way they were before," she said. "At least then you would not have to bury your head in the sand. You could think for

yourself and maybe reason a way out of this Viennese nightmare."

Now within sight of the Schönbrunn, she stopped on a street corner and pointed up at a mysteriously opened window on an industrial building's second floor.

"That's where it all happened," she said. "That's Herr Doctor's lab. That's where the great work of humanity was performed."

A great potion, Marta said, designed to rip reality in two. The drug did not cloud the mind even slightly. Perceptions were altered as reality itself was bent to accommodate its new contours. Thus, it was the most effective hallucinogenic substance ever conceived, Marta said. In that every vision became scientifically verifiable. And over time with enough takers objective reality unspooled into a waking dreamlife absent of parameters or first causes. Nobody gave a damn about anything a short time later.

The secret ingredient of this "High Tea," according to Marta, was the root of a blood-fed tree growing in at the gates of Mauthausen-Gusen that Herr Doctor had stolen once having conceived of it himself in a realized vision.

"It was entirely a recursive imaginative act," Marta said to grandma, "A creation *ex nihilo*," she said. "So it was that God had appeared and created himself millennia ago."

The two-hundred-gallon vat of the drug that would be created by the spring of 1942 would be the entirety of the narcotic that humanity would have access to excluding some other miraculous occurrence. By the time of its discovery by an inquisitive G.I. named Shane McPike in 1946, the drug's creator would have been long gone. Likely to Dachau or maybe to the aforementioned Mauthausen-Gusen where the political enemies of

the Reich were sent to die. He could have disappeared recursively into the bulwark of his own reality. At a point he had become the equal of God on High. He didn't require ordinary reality to exist.

Marta Willits knew all this because she had once emerged from a cracked reality. Hard to know if it had anything to do with High Tea (that as of 1940 was not yet brewed. But time when regarding this substance was not inviolable. Obviously.). Perhaps the world was fundamentally illogical and there was no explanation necessary. High Tea in this instance was not a hallucinogenic so much as a stimulant. It cleansed the Doors of Perception rather than shuttering them.

Marta knew enough to not mourn the eighty million dead of the encroaching War. All life was transitory, a mere chemical anomaly on the path from inert state to inert state. No need to mourn anybody as they were not so real to begin with.

Still, when the cries and moaning started, she, along with Grandma Hildegarde, tilted her head.

The train to Dachau was here! The train to Dachau was here! Everybody aboard!

This train's departure was what she wanted to see now, more than any dead King's topiary. In the square, the Jews were queuing, arranged in a pattern like birds up from North Africa landed on a dead log.

Marta Willits thought it was a grand sight to behold and ran toward it. She assumed in a sense it was arranged just for her.

Turn 20

The little girl at the train window had a face that from this angle melted into the glass it was pressed against.

"*Liebeschen*, open up, open up," little Marta cried and presented the black heart to her. From inside a length a torn razor wire, it was handed over. Then Marta begged Hildegarde for a pin to attach to the girl's dress properly. Red dress just above the embroidery. She wanted it pinned to the place exactly above her real heart. So, there would be no confusion as to what the drawing represented.

The heart was dark and awesomely black as the gap in reality at the center of the Milky Way galaxy. Nobody but Marta realized what it was supposed to represent. Nobody knew how it was supposed to be taken.

"It's yours, it always was yours," Marta said as a soldier ran down the tracks to shoo them away. Seeing this, Hildegarde grabbed her granddaughter. Too late for everything now, too late to either take it back or deny it had been given.

Finding strength, Hildegarde grabbed her granddaughter and ran down the incline to the

street. From behind her, the German soldier was screaming, “halt, halt!”

Hildegarde Willits did not halt. She waited desperately for the kraut bullet to strike her down. She closed her eyes as she ran expecting it to hit her and kill her immediately.

To the best of her knowledge, it never came. Within forty seconds she was in another reality altogether. Somewhere in Vienna, yes, but different. Savage rock music was playing. And in the road’s center a man was dousing himself with petrol, prefatory to setting himself on fire. For something.

Turn 21: Two Birds Joining Together

Thinking of Thich Quang Duc, considering mightily the mighty profundity therein, Bill Apple concluded that the world was ready for alien takeover.

“I think there’s a planet orbiting Barnard’s Star,” he said to Pam Wednesday lying on the floor of his bedroom, “which is where they all come from. The home world. Somebody whispered it to me once in a dream,” he said. “I think the alien home world contains chlorine in the atmosphere. So, you see they walk around with gas masks on over their face.”

It was the Holocaust that brought them to earth, according to Bill, once detecting the uptick of chlorine in the atmosphere. You see it was the uptick in chlorine resultant from the gas chambers in eastern Europe that acted as a signal to the aliens.

“It’s like sticking your bare ass up in the air when you first get thrown in jail,” he said to Pam. “I mean, the universal sign of welcome. They saw all the chlorine on their sensors and just went crazy,” he said to her. “How fucking long would it take

under the constraints of the speed of light to fly from the alien home world to earth? Probably from 1944 to now," he said. "I don't know after the astrophysics of the situation," he said to her. "I frankly admit my un-studious nature. I cop to it," he told her. "I'm proud of it. I don't know what percentage of the speed of light such a journey would take. But it's obviously possible since they're here. And who knows how many in the future will be soon arriving? And for what purpose?"

Bill had long since internalized the argument that there was no such thing as a benign alien visitation. As all technology was an actualizing of a given species' militant impulses. Nobody took an interstellar voyage just to say hello. He thought every difficult voyage was a voyage of conquest.

"We're fucked if they decide to take action against us," he said to Pam. Or rather the large, ornate hookah between them. He assumed the message would carry over to her across an expanse of space. In reality, Pam was less than three feet from him. But Bill lacked the energy to lift his head and take a peek. The large hookah had dominated his field of vision. He assumed reality was stable enough that Pam would persist in his room. Maybe her consciousness had been transmogrified to the point that she was another person but with the same name. If so, she would alert him indirectly that this was so. She would let slip that she was feeling nervous about this plot against God that she and Bill were a part of. Prior to this moment she had been all for it. If anything, she felt the conspiracy was too slow moving. She wanted a hole in the world to appear from out of nowhere and expand infinitely. She wanted to recall what it was like to be nothing.

They were fucked regardless. The chlorine-breathing aliens would do what they wanted with them. Bill Apple knew this implicitly and he was

attempting to communicate this to everybody he knew. It had been going on like this far too long for it to have continued steadily. All this crazy monkey shit, all the civil wars and the passionless porn and, of course, the gas chambers. Ecce Homo! There was apparently some semblance of moral law in the universe. And that law was in the midst of condemning humanity. These aliens might well have been the actualized will of He Who Wrote the Law, a sci-fi equivalent to the angels of the Old Testament. They weren't going to take no for an answer when they posited when it was time for men to die. Read your Bible if you think it wasn't so. These motherfuckers didn't fuck around when it came to extinction-level events. Jesus while on the cross supposedly stayed His Father's hand. But there likely would not be a second similarly charitable act in the offing. Merely Bill Apple wished for the end to proceed quickly. He supported death by gamma-ray burst, wherein a belching proximate black hole would emit a death ray that would in an instant fry the world. There would be no warning and no moral context in which to frame the spectacle. He thought it would be a fitting end for those like Bill who had never asked to be born in the first place and were marginally resentful about it. It would be over in tenths of a second. The earth might be thrown from orbit as a result. Only the alien race would be there to bear passive witness. To them it might seem a slightly sad event.

For years on end, Apple claimed, the aliens walked amongst us, donning invisible gas masks.

"They're wondering after the lack of chlorine in the air," he said to Pam and picked up the hose emanating from the hookah. Thick elephantine thing it was and covered with sayings in a fine Arabic hand. Bill had bought this hookah in Timbuktu while on a joy ride through Africa and had the whole thing

shipped back to him in pieces. The artwork on the bottom vat's glasswork was exquisite. The whole thing belonged in a museum rather than on the bedroom floor of a student apartment. The chap who made it was some sort of dark genius. And so, it might be recalled that in lieu of a left eye the genius sported a large button made of ivory.

Bill said the aliens were growing increasingly pissed at the lack of poisonous fumes available to them.

"It gnaws at them existentially," he said to Pam after holding his hit as long as possible. The old bellows weren't as responsive as before, owing to so much pot smoke having been imbibed over the years. He would certainly, if he lived long enough, develop COPD because of the habit. In his estimation this was a small price to pay for the silk womb Mary Jane cloaked a body in when taken in large enough amounts. Bill Apple considered pot medicine. He was outraged that anybody should comment negatively on his pot-blowing habits. He was sick. Sick with life. He needed relief. When you were high, assuredly you were a little bit dead. He was ready to come to blows at anybody's suggestion that he smoked too much weed.

If he had smoked too much weed, he wouldn't have been so industrious.

"I've got so many irons in the fire it's impossible to keep track of them all," Bill told Pam Wednesday. He was referring to his on-going tracking of the death of the earth combined with his presently unofficial matriculation at Stanford. The university had kicked him out years before for multiple offenses, but he still audited select classes with his roommate Siddhartha. He thought he was making something of himself despite it all. He sold micro doses of acid to Silicon Valley go-getters to make ends meet. He kept a spreadsheet on his Mac of all

the transactions which probably was not wise. At night he tracked the alien invasion over the Internet. He had come to see that the desire of this Master Race was to build chlorine gas chambers. They needed to breathe chlorine. It was simply a matter of survival of the fittest. That's all. They weren't evil creatures in Bill's understanding of the word. They had been invited here by the Nazis. Your average American Jew was lucky to have them around. They weren't antisemitic in the classical sense of the word. They found all races and religions disgusting. They were equal opportunity haters.

They were in disguise obviously. But, according to Bill, the way you could tell a chlorine-breathing-alien from your average U.S. male was that they were having trouble breathing.

"The invisible masks they wear are efficient," he told Pam. "But technology can only take you so far. It's not like home for them. It's not like the pure green air they're used to on their home world. There they breathe in and breathe out unaided. They're a happy lot with these eyes as big as silver dollar pancakes. True story: they wear their genitals outside their clothing as an accoutrement like a watch chain. It's only logical if you think about it. What's the purpose of hiding your junk under wraps if only to have people constantly guessing about what lies underneath? They have holes in their pants crotches is how they do it. Very simple and civilized. We're the freaks, babe, if you consider it from all sides. We're the ones who have growing up to do."

The last time Bill Apple masturbated in public was in San Francisco riding on the BART. When a public safety type gave him grief about it, he told the officer all humans had some growing up to do.

Look, what's the harm of a little auto-love? Even when executed in public?

Very healthy procedure. Akin to tai-chi. In fact, Bill Apple thought he should write a book on the subject. Call it *Getting Off/On the BART*. He wasn't bullshitting here even slightly. But the cop ran Bill anyway. They were a lot of motherfucking technofascists up there in SF. Fuck Zuck and all that. If Bill hadn't sold so many of these techies acid, he would have taken action against them long ago.

The long and short of it was Bill wanted the chlorine-breathing aliens to win this war against Homo Sap.

"I mean you look at this situation," he said to Pam Wednesday, "and consider the following: that there's one good guy and one bad guy in this situation. And we're not on the right side of that equation. They're our guests and we're treating them like shit," he told Pam. "We'll have to use their masks to breathe eventually," he said to Pam and shrugged as best he could while lying flat on his back. "It's OK," he said. "They'll build a gas chamber in every town in America, every town in the world if only we'll let them. They mean us no harm. All you're going to have to do to survive is avoid the gas chambers when their doors swing open. I think there's a volume of chlorine even their masks can't handle. You're just gonna have to be on the ball is all. Maybe they'll allow an app on your phone that'll alert you to it. You're just gonna have to be careful from now on. It's no big deal. Look, because anybody can get used to anything if circumstances dictate that they must," Bill Apple said and passed out briefly.

Pam Wednesday said she wouldn't mind dying if, as Bill had described, you wouldn't be aware that you were dead.

"I wonder how it would work, that shutting down of consciousness," Pam said to him. "I mean, can

you be dead and not know that you're dead? Doesn't the universe need your consent to wipe you off its face? If you're in the middle of a thought and you die, does the thought complete by itself? Or does it dangle there forever incomplete? And then, from where does it dangle?"

In Bill Apple's opinion, ghosts originated from such untimely and sudden deaths. Ghosts were merely imprints of consciousness hanging on the surface of the world like the fingerprints of corpses. They could be exorcised only through a disruption of the spacetime continuum. This happened near the event horizon of a black hole. There was nothing spiritual to them. Really there was nothing spiritual to the universe, if Bill would be allowed to finish the thought. Scientific explanations were often incomplete and on their far edge mysticism invariably extended from them like a fungal growth on an uncooked root. Bill thought every phenomenon in the world was subject to a rational explanation. But that rationality must take into account the possibility of super-science and also the idea that consciousness in some form might survive the body it was incubated in.

"Take, for example, Thich Quang Duc, the Vietnamese monk who set himself on fire in 1963," Bill Apple told Pam Wednesday. "You can't reasonably say it didn't happen," he told her. "You can't debunk the event and the videography involved like they do to so many alien sightings nowadays," he said. "It happened. It's in the historical record. Thich sat in that intersection and doused himself with gasoline."

Pam Wednesday roused herself from her stupor momentarily. "Kerosene?" she asked him.

"I think it was gasoline," he told her. "It might have been a lower octane than the kind used nowadays in modern cars. There might have been,

ummmmhh, certain lead impurities in the gas that caused it to burn slightly less robustly than the way it might have otherwise," he said.

Anyway: Thich Quang Duc. He walked the infinitesimally thin tightrope between sublimity and mania. Doused in fuel, he folded himself into a full lotus and then he lit a match. And then—study the evidence yourself on YouTube if you don't believe this—he began to sway to some undetectable music.

"I don't think he felt the flames at all," Bill said to Pam. "I don't think prior to the moment of his physical extinction he was in any discomfort at all."

He had overcome death long before dying by stilling his own *I-am* to the point that the distinction between his life and death was rendered meaningless. And so here is the proof of the notion that Apple was contemplating all along. Which was that one could be alive and dead at the same time.

One ceased to be alive when the ego died, Bill Apple said. Once the ego died the body became a vestigial and vulgar cloak. One became what one truly was through the body's destruction. Which was absolutely nothing.

"Think of it like this," he said to Pam. "Thich Quang Duc was trying to show how meaningless death was to him. He was trying to show us all that we should not necessarily be afraid of dying. Because death by its very definition is meaningless. Thich had achieved enlightenment and broke the cycle of rebirth. Therefore, he had nothing to lose."

Pam wondered aloud how a nihilist like Bill Apple had managed to believe in reincarnation.

"I believe in reincarnation," he told her, "Just as I believe in ghosts. I believe it's a result of some configuration of nature. Quantum physics or something of that ilk. But I do believe all those not entirely self-aware of their own emptiness will be

forced to come back eventually. It makes sense that ghosts are forced to come back. That they will be forced to inhabit another person's dream infinitely. As you either dream forever or are awake. As you either are under the influence of your own misperceptions or are entirely free from them," he said. "There's no third alternative."

Now, somebody of Jim Jones' ilk was a dark wizard of the most terrifying variety, Bill said. He was presently neither reincarnated nor enlightened but on a dark psychical plane communicating with beings far darker than any Lovecraftian God that could be summoned out of the ether via a magical incantation.

"I mention Jim Jones because I've been thinking about him non-stop of late and thinking of the damage his Blood Magik wreaked upon the world," Apple said. "I mean, you can trace everything, all modern history, back to that moment in the Guyanese jungle when nine hundred nine sacrifices were made to the infernal worm God 0OOOOOOOOO," Bill said. "The sacrificial blood was spilt so that the God could be reborn. And then the God was reborn, and the dark wizard consumed by it. But unlike Thich Quang Duc, there was no morality in Jones' demise. He was neither enlightened nor deluded. So it was that he became part of the consuming worm. Musta been. There was no other place for him. And notice too, my dear, the coincidence between the events. That is, between Jonestown, and the alien invasion. Also, the discovery of the supermassive black hole, this so-called Sagittarius A*, at the center of our galaxy. This structure too, is a kind of God awaiting a wizard's summoning. But we can only pray that when our world passes by it, we will have all been released into nonbeing. If I were to pray for anything, Pam, this is what I would pray for. We are

too riven by terrors to have to experience his presence. And we pray for all life to be spared his presence and for a kind of enlightenment to descend upon the world before it is too late."

Pam Wednesday had a profound misunderstanding about black holes. Adopting a sci-fi cliché, she thought that they were gateways to alternative realities. She thought they weren't an end but a beginning.

"If you go through one," she said, "you could fall into a reality in which you are falling eternally. Forever, that is, until you are all that there is. You observe a self who is observing yourself falling. Until there is an infinity of your own creation greater than every atom in the universe. It's fucked up, I know. But it could happen given what we know about the universe."

According to Bill Apple, nothing could be further from the truth.

"It's my genius roommate Sid who knows this shit like the back of his hand," he said pointing outside his bedroom door. "General Relativity and all that," he said. "Look, these structures are not something you fall into," he said, recalling Sid's rantings on the subject. "The black hole. Rather, it's an end point, a dent in reality, not a tunnel out of it. On its surface everything gets shredded and reduced to essential sub-atomic particles. These particles go nowhere and are arranged on the lens of the structure forever. In other words, it's not an escape hatch as much as a trap. In other words, you're fucked in advance before the journey begins."

He said to Pam that the important finding of Sid's work was that there was no escape from this vale of tears. He said you shouldn't look to science for ideas of salvation. As the universe that science described so beautifully was anathema to any

notion of human escape. If you were a human and wanted to escape, therefore, you needed to reject science and seek other explanations for the way things were.

“Think of a religion,” Bill said, “focus on it until the point that its obvious absurdities disappear. And there you are. Doesn’t matter which religion,” he said. “The portal that opened when Christ died on the cross is pretty much the same one that Aleister Crowley opened while buggering his red-lipped boy on the sands of North Africa. It’s all the same, really. But the point is it leads to somewhere else. Someplace else where men are immortal and can be thought of as Gods. It avoids the sci-fi trap of believing technology is spiritually enabling. Technology’s spiritually enabling only to the point that a person is unaware of how it actually works. And then it becomes another dead thing to be played with and disposed of quickly.”

Religion, Bill Apple said, provided men with a sense of awe about his surroundings. Once absent of miracles, however, a man would grow skeptical about the God at the religion’s center. And a true scientific perspective precluded the notion that miracles were real. Thus, there was a need to obliterate science before the age of miracles could begin in earnest. In this endeavor he thought High Tea was a great aid. More so was the requirement to meet rationality wherever it reared its ugly head and destroy it.

The chlorine-inhaling aliens Bill Apple was now an agent of surely appreciated his efforts on their part. There was only one Master Race available to one planet at a time. Humans were now the aliens’ wards. And, surely, they liked their wards dumb and unquestioning. They didn’t likely see the management of humans as any high priority. And

who knew if they wouldn’t deactivate the invisible masks and let the humans die of chlorine poisoning?

It's a cruel world, certainly. Nobody’s looking out for individual happiness, and everything tended towards increased entropy and information loss. The longer a man lived, the more he tended to desire a childhood existence released from disillusionment. Certainly, it’s why Bill Apple got so fucked-up regularly. He had a distinct memory of childhood joy experienced while rolling around in the grass with his brother, Larry. He thought this experience had something to do with him not knowing any better at the time. The grass was God in this vision. As were the beetles that dwelt within it. All of life was a widening tunnel opening into a warm light. At that point there was nothing to be melancholic about. There was no reason to think this summer day would ever end. There were no real boundaries to true happiness apparently. It occurred in an instant, coeval with infinity.

Bill thought a drug should be produced that replicated childhood ignorance. This had been High Tea’s promise to him, but it had failed completely. Presently he was off the stuff for good. This didn’t mean it hadn’t infiltrated his brain to the point that it changed him irrevocably. He hadn’t thought of the consequences prior to imbibing. No drug had ever lived up to the hype. He was convinced that this one wouldn’t either.

“I’m going out and setting things straight with the Lord,” he said to Pam Wednesday who was not paying attention to him any longer. “I feel there is a part of me that requires some form of penance before moving on. Something slothful if not heinous has happened in my mind and I feel the need to right the wrong. It has something to do with my disdain for objective reality, I think. The example of Thich Quang Duc told me this was so. Even though I

appreciated Thich's strength, I could never emulate him. There's no intellectual reason for this. I'm weak inside merely. I have no real reason to remain alive, yet I am fearful of death. I have a sick desire to retain my ego. I've done so many drugs that I hoped at some point to cure myself of the habit. But now I see drugs contribute nothing in the way of true spiritual development. It could even retard spiritual development, I'm thinking. I do think it's possible to evolve through the committing of good deeds. Maybe the aliens will have their say in this, but I have come to believe in the reality of karma. This is after I have smoked what must be a hundred pounds of pot over the years. I believe my case for transcendence will be made through so many good deeds alone. I don't believe I have enough brain cells left to attempt to achieve satori in the traditional way. In my present state I couldn't achieve satori if satori was a vat of chocolate pudding, and I was thrown into it. I would simply slide off the pudding's surface into some other place altogether. My return is assured, but I think it could be as a higher form of life. Maybe a Republican this time with some motherfucking money. "

By the time Pam had fallen asleep twenty minutes later, Bill Apple had located his sneakers underneath the bed.

"Don't fucking steal anything," he said to her. Then with mild difficulty he opened his bedroom door. He wanted to get started on his spiritual quest by taking the Caltrain north to the Queen City. He was too fucked up to drive presently and besides he didn't want to.

He had a notion of himself as the savior of humanity. Such a designation belied the ignominy of searching out a parking space in downtown SF.

The Caltrain would take him there in style, albeit in the teeth-grinding "progressive" way of so many

chipper Bay Area environmentalists. Bill Apple hated those cunts worse than he hated Republicans. Which was in turn worse than he hated the tech overlords of Silicon Valley who he had dreamed incessantly of murdering in one fell swoop, Hopfrog style, when the party he had invited them all to [*and they had accepted?* ed.] had turned panicked and fiery. He hated greenies so much that he had done intentional damage to his car's catalytic converter after it cleared emissions. This among other reasons was why he didn't like to drive. A bad catalytic converter fucked up your whole emissions system. So, he was doing the enviros' bidding (though he was too stupid to see this). Or to put it another way: there was no beating the NoCal government. You wanted to live freely nowadays, you moved to Montana. Where apparently anything short of sheep rustling was permissible. The Caltrain frankly was the only sane way around the Bay area. Everything was fucked-up around here, everything was overpriced and disappointing. There was no reason to stay in the Bay area except for inertia. That and the desire to correct the damage done by various Evil SF Wizards in the dark 1970s. Back then, Bill Apple imagined, rent was cheap, and all sorts of cool shit transpired. He thought he was required to build a time machine. He thought his genius friend Siddhartha could aid him in the endeavor.

Momentarily perplexed by Sid's whereabouts, Bill found him in their apartment's kitchenette swinging from a handmade noose.

"*I have been to the edge of the world and fallen over*," was the total explanatory note Sid had left for the presence of what seemed to be his corpse. Hard to say how he had done it as the aluminum beam he had tied the rope around seemed built to bear around thirty pounds, max. Sid being Sid, however, had chosen the spot with meticulous care. He had

assumed perhaps this was Bill's favorite room and therefore the body wouldn't be allowed to tarry long on the rope. Perhaps the Hindu religion held a taboo against rotten corpses. They wanted them fresh for the pyre. Any gangrene at all would stand with them as evidence of a corrupted soul.

"You didn't seem the type to take the easy way out," Apple said to Sid's body. He briefly dabbed at the corpse's midsection with a middle finger. Despite the evidence of his eyes, he thought the reality that Sid was truly dead about seventy percent only. Obviously, the physical proof was in front of him. On the other hand, Sid was not a type given to despair. Suicide was an irrational act (wasn't it?) but Sid was a profoundly logical being. He hadn't seemed depressed all the while (though Bill admittedly was not the most perceptive of souls). And he was certain that if Sid had killed himself, his suicide note would have been far more explanatory than that which was left.

I have been to the edge of the world and fallen over. What the fuck did that mean? A scientist to his soul, Sid wasn't one for poetic ambiguity. He might have been expected to use footnotes in his suicide note. Possessed of a scientific bearing, he was not the type to indulge in aphorism.

As in a way math and metaphor were at opposite poles of human expression. Sid would never have killed himself without first creating an algebraic formula explaining it all to a group of his fellow brainiacs:

$$(xa + K)\beta = \theta$$

n which x=so many nights spent alone jerking off guiltily to free porn, a = the scorn incurred through a Stanford professor over his radical astrophysical

theories, K = the constant, invisible pressure of the conservative Indian culture he hailed from, and β= the mysterious dread born of self-consciousness that all humans feel in varying degrees. θ = was the sum of the despair accrued on the left side of the equation. There was no triggering value for suicide though Sid might have argued otherwise. To him, everything was reducible to mathematics. Which likely made his suicide inevitable.

Perhaps underneath Sid's baggy hoodie there was a support brace keeping the pressure on his neck to a minimum. If that was so, Bill would cry once Sid mysteriously sprung back to life in front of him. It could all be categorized as a play for attention. Again, Sid was not the type to do such a thing. Maybe he had some unknown motive that Bill was not aware of. Maybe this was all a science experiment gone tragically wrong.

Or maybe he had discovered something fundamental concerning the nature of death related to his theory of black holes and wished to demonstrate his findings to himself.

This was more like Sid, actually.

"I hope it proved a worthwhile endeavor for you," Bill said to Sid's corpse and without so much as inspecting further beat it out the front door. Pam Wednesday would see to the corpse (if that's what it was) hanging there. She was conscientious in that way, Bill knew. She couldn't abide a mess that she didn't make herself. She would cut Sid down and at the very least toss the body by the apartment dumpster. She might call the proper authorities if she figured it was in her best interest to do so. She wasn't so high constantly that she couldn't figure out that she might be in trouble for treating the corpse disrespectfully. She could blame it all on Bill of course but she knew better. Bill Apple had earned his redoubtable reputation in stoner circles. He was

likely insane. And, therefore, beyond moral suasion. He could do anything to anyone at any time for any reason that a mind could construct.

Despite his inner turmoil, Apple had a placid demeanor that attracted rank strangers to him.

“Yes, I’m a post-doc here,” he said to two such strangers, a husband and wife from Canton O-high-O vacationing by the Bay. Of Bill Apple, they had wanted to know whether he had attended Stanford University and then in what capacity. They had wanted to engage in conversation with a future Master of the Universe.

Canton and the whole of Ohio really was lonely for its nascent billionaires. John D. Rockefeller was dead and gone. The homes of Euclid Avenue were in great disrepair as was the vast majority of Cleveland.

The couple were like so many other ninety-nine percenters: overly impressed by Stanford and its connection to the American oligarchy.

“How smart do you have to be,” was the husband’s wondrous exclamation, “to be studying here for as long as you have!”

Bill Apple was plenty smart, in fact. Smart enough to know that he shouldn’t have burst the man’s bubble concerning Stanford U’s true purpose on the American scene. Not now, anyway.

They were all on a crowded train headed north to do who-knew-what to who-knew-whom. Bill didn’t want to get into a shouting match with some yokels over the fraudulent nature of higher education in the U.S.A. Not just at Stanford (though they of late were the most egregious example of vacuous elitism passing itself off as meritocratic striving). Study all you want, yokels, and have your son or daughter test with an IQ of over 160, but he or she will *never* attend Stanford University. Not with skin of that chalky hue. Not unless select folks in Canton,

Ohio wielded more political clout than Bill assumed was possible nowadays. Not unless the dress the wife wore was made threadbare intentionally as a kind of inside joke amongst plutocrats.

No, for this brilliant theoretical kid, Stanford merely was an impediment for all he or she would accomplish in life. Stanford University would never be on the side of the highly motivated yet disenfranchised. The university was built by the oligarchs for the oligarchs. Its recent lurching to the left was part of a pincer movement orchestrated by the Ruling Class to crush the middle class between racialized tribalism on one side and elitist technocracy on the other. Apple thought that if America was ever to realize its promise there needed to arise an American Mao to set the campuses of the nation on fire. Quite literally. Preferably with the students and faculty still in the buildings locked in and wondering what the exalted nature of their educational attainment had bought them at this moment.

The yokels of the world, on the other hand, were necessary for Stanford's existence. As they represented the ilk the beatified Stanford student would attempt to rise above after graduation.

"I mean, he did his undergrad at Oklahoma State!" had been one such insult directed at a teaching assistant by Apple's freshman year roommate while at Stanford. In the roommate's eyes, a veritable subhuman had wandered into Palo Alto's immaculate confines and remained! Betcha this TA's mother worked incessantly, not to experience liberation but as a necessary second income for the family. The family may have even ridden mass transit regularly out of necessity. It was all too much for an International Studies matriculate at Stanford to bear! But, then again, without the Oklahoma States of this land how could Stanford's

elite status be preserved? They were required to exist (but perhaps at arm's length?). But surely one from their rank, excluding an Einstein-level brilliance, should never have been brought into the Stanford family.

Apple lied to the yokels about his educational status not because he wanted to impress them unduly, but because he felt it was always preferable to lie to a stranger rather than tell him the truth.

"It's a typical LaVeyan strategy, a way of exercising the creative muscles, so to speak," he said to another rider, Sil Partridge, once the Ohio couple has disembarked. "I mean," he said, "you can have two general responses to any question: the truth and a lie. But one of these responses is given thoughtlessly and subserviently where the other requires a good deal of thought and courage to execute. In the end, it's always preferable to lie than tell the truth from a Satanist perspective. If only that in lying you are challenging the status quo. If only that you are pursuing a course of self-interest apart from the concerns of the weak-willed."

Sil Partridge was surprisingly sympathetic to this argument. To the point that he felt the need to elaborate on it.

"People aren't worth the paper they're printed on, really," he said to Bill and stared out the window. They were approaching Brisbane, California, Sil's former ramshackle hometown, presently now verboten due to the astro-rents. Home for Sil now was the back of a burned-out Olds '88 in San Jose. He liked it there fine, but he missed Brisbane. One day he'd move back in whether it was verboten or not.

Like Bill, Sil held a grudge against the present incarnation of the Bay Area. Unlike Bill, he was capable of detailed planning. He was abstemious to a fault and foreswore the shedding of green utterly.

He drank beer only, albeit at all hours of the day. The barkeep would ask him what he's having, and he'd tell him merely "beer." He usually meant the cheapest domestic draft available. In saying "beer," he was hearkening back to the good old days of the neighborhood saloon where the establishments were contractually obliged to serve only one brand. That reference fucked with your average millennial barkeep. They thought you were being preciously postmodern about things. When exactly the opposite was true.

In the good old days of SF circa 1975, a man could live well on eight thousand dollars a year.

"I had me a nice one bedroom in North Beach," Sil, who was sixty-four years old, told Bill, "And went out four nights a week minimum. It was a port town in those days and that's where I worked: as a longshoreman. I mean, I got back from the war and the job was there for me. I was never in want as far as I could recall. I defined myself by my hometown as if it was a marriage that would last."

It was a typical sob story for these parts and Bill Apple couldn't be bothered with it. He told Sil Partridge something to the effect of *don't do the crime if you can't do the crime*. The "crime" being that he was a member of the white working class that gambled and lost on the continued largess of the white ruling class. Sil needed to be more like Bill Apple and not give a rat's ass about anything. Sleeping in a burnt-out Olds was a hoot. That's fine. It beat sleeping in a burnt-out Hyundai Sonata, didn't it? Actually, Sil wasn't complaining so much as explaining. He agreed with Bill Apple that it was up to the oppressed to dispose of their oppressors. And this was what he was travelling north to do.

"Check this out, bitch," he said to Bill who by degrees was sobering up. He unzipped the gym bag next to him. Inside of it was a mask that apart from

its shiny S&M vinyl underlay could have been described as ceremony. “I used to date a stripper in the seventies who gave me this,” he said. “Claimed she had gotten it from an evil German wizard who simply disappeared one day as if consumed by his own magic. Claimed the wearer could strap it on only once. At which point it would disappear and reside like a cage on their soul forever!”

The mask was covered with copper wires, file sharpened bits of bottle glass, and images from a kiddie pornography movie shrunk down and laminated. Sil Partridge took care to handle the motherfucking thing.

“He put a spell on it, the wizard,” he said reporting what the stripper, Mary, Queen of Shots, had told him. “He said anybody with the guts to put it on their face had earned the power that they would receive from it. Incredible, dark power,” he said. “Of the sort few in modern times ever knew existed let alone having possessed the ability to master.”

The obvious question was why hadn’t Sil put it on himself?

“Who says I didn’t?” he said to Bill then turned his face up to the car’s light. Indeed, there were tiny scars running down his face at approximate points of where the mask straps should go.

Bill Apple examined Sil’s face and smiled.

“So, what you’re saying,” he said to him, “is that you’re stupid in addition to being crazy. You were supposed to slip it on. Then it would vanish. But you slipped it on, and it didn’t fucking vanish. And nothing, nothing else. My guess,” Bill said, “is maybe its batteries are low on juice. Get ‘em replaced and try again in the morning. Looks like a job for triple A’s,” he said. “But maybe you’ll need to consult the manual first before you go ahead and make the purchase.”

Before being so rudely interrupted, Sil Partridge was about to say the mask needed to be worn only by He Who Was Worthy of Power.

“The power,” Bill Apple said. “Who’s worthy of it? It’s evil power, isn’t it? So, who’s worthy of evil power? Isn’t that technically everybody? Maybe whatshisface: Dumbledork?”

“Dumbledore,” Sil Partridge said.

“Is that his name? No what is it? What’s the other motherfucker’s name?”

“Valdemort,” Sil Partridge said and made a fist to strike Bill Apple with. He would have struck him too if the train hadn’t pulled in at that exact moment. Sil Partridge was a Vietnam Vet. He was a tough old buzzard who didn’t let the shits of this world get him down.

The key to dealing with the shits of this world, he had always found, was to punch their lights out before they had a chance to say boo. It’s easy to lay somebody out, Sil found, if they’re not expecting it. It was done through an uppercut blow administered to the side of the jaw. Swing from the heels when you do so, and you’ll be fine. You need to feel the punch travel from the soles of your feet upward. Nowadays nobody knew how to take a punch. And even if your victim wasn’t out cold, the shock of what had just happened had usually driven them to their knees passively. Once they were like that, Sil said, you could do with them as you willed. It was simply a matter of summoning the will to be violent. Violence was a type of threshold that one needed to cross against the pull of so much state-sponsored inculcation that taught a fella to be meek and mild always.

Sil Partridge and this roué, Bill Apple, were on the same page at least regarding the need to transgress. Bill’s problem (and that of Anton Sander LaVey’s as well) was that he didn’t see himself as a

potential victim of such libertinism. They were both rapists in their mental maps rather than rape victims. Sil Partridge, who had a baccalaureate degree from the school of hard knocks, knew far better. He knew that to live outside the law you must be honest (per Bobby Dylan). You gave as well as you got in this life. Bill Apple's problem was that he was too associated with America's Overclass to know this was so. Sil saw right through Bill's shambolic ways and means. Bill's mom was an oral surgeon. Bill's dad did something so tech-oriented that they didn't have a proper title for it. Home was in Seattle in the same Lake Washington neighborhood where Kurt Cobain offed himself in '94. If he was an Uber-mensch, it was of a soft, upper middle-class strain.

But he had talked smack to a violent man and must be punished. He would over time see the error of his ways. Dark wizardry was a 24/7 vocation, after all. In which professional gains were measured only in relation to metaphysical setbacks. If he lived through the experience, Bill would see that he was in the wrong.

The will to power was strong in Sil Partridge but his body was weak.

"Ulcers on the feet because of some hard living," Sil said to a passing stranger when attempting to fall in right behind Bill in the train shed. Seeing him limping along, the stranger had offered Sil a shoulder to support himself on. Which was embarrassing to someone who felt himself beyond caring. He was frail merely, old beyond his years. But his spirit raged inside ceaselessly. His reclusive lifecycle precluded a large amount of feedback concerning his appearance. At moments like this, he saw himself the way others saw him and despaired.

Yes, ulcers on the feet and cataracts in his eyes that, would he have cared enough to take advantage of the VA's generous programs, would have been taken care of gratis.

"Whyn't you slow down, fucker?" Sil said to Bill from the sixty-yard distance he was following behind him up Market Street. Bill in fact wasn't moving especially fast. But Sil could barely walk now. Plus, the dirty mask he was carrying around in that gym bag was surprisingly (and mystically?) heavy. He thought another ten minutes would be the death of him. He was resolved not to stop, but his body might fail regardless. He was resolved to see this thing through to the end. He wasn't about to let a fish off the hook because his feet were bleeding and he felt lightheaded.

In the 'Nam while out on patrol he had endured pain and exhaustion a hundred times worse than what he was presently feeling.

"Just like then: suck it up," Sil Partridge said to himself picking up the pace. He recalled a twenty-five-mile patrol initiated at nine in the morning on a ninety-eight-degree day. They were looking for VC but found only heat exhaustion. He had to carry, and was in turn carried, for consecutive hours. He considered it the worst experience of his life. Whereas this experience would hardly be recalled by him once it was over.

The wonderful thing about SF being that there were so many attractions within walking distance of each other.

"Thank God," Sil said when seeing Bill stop at a destination in the Western Addition. From Market and Fourth it was barely a mile. But Sil Partridge at most had another three hundred yards left in his disgusting feet.

He leaned against a lamppost while watching Bill Apple inspect a building's address. The lamppost

doubled as a hiding place for Sil should Apple turn around. Bill seemed utterly gangbusters to get inside the red brick structure. Sil didn't know nor care why. He was relieved he could catch his breath. And once he had caught his breath, he would need to figure a way to slip the mask on the motherfucker.

Incapacitate him first, sure, but with what? He would have to make sure he hadn't merely killed Bill before the mask went on. The worm God 0OOOOOOOOO to whom the mask was dedicated surely wouldn't appreciate having a mere corpse as a servant. It might look harshly on he who had made the offering. And then Sil would be in a world of hurt far more than a half-blind homeless person should be.

He was obviously neither a doctor nor a professional thug of the sort who knew how to skillfully club a man on the noggin hard enough to knock him out. He would have to play it by ear, therefore. He would have to take a guess and double-down on that guess. Once the mask was on Bill, Sil Partridge would squat and observe. If everything went according to Hoyle, he would utter a prayer the dark wizard Hugo Schein himself had coined and taught to Mary, Queen of Shots:

Blessed be No One
Of No Sacrament and Decency
Until the Great Black God Thanatosis
Devour us All, Amen and Amen

It could be the start of something awesome in Sil Partridge's life. More likely, it would be the start of something awful in Bill Apple's life.

The committing of a violent act was a self-actualizing event as far as Sil was concerned. It was the alpha and omega altogether. It was the

intriguing intro and the awe-inspiring denouement at once.

In the dumpster between he and Bill somebody had thrown away a hardbound edition of the *Book of Mormon*. Waterlogged yet brittle because of the age of the leather binding, this seemed a decent enough improvised cudgel to rely on. Couldn't have weighed more than two pounds but its outside was replete with the sort of metallic edges that surely would wound someone when brought down with great force on his or her unprepared form. Needed to be quick about the action and supremely decisive. Sil knew the basic mechanics involved in attacking someone. This covered the initial approach to the blow's follow through. Even slight hesitation would result in failure and likely a beatdown received at the hands of the intended victim. Sil assumed there was a spiritual dimension to this change of fortunes. That the dark God of Violence was punishing an apostate. Or perhaps God the Father, the God of the Mormons, had intervened with a bit of Old Testament vindictiveness.

Regardless, Sil Partridge was a zealot of violence. He would not hesitate to hurt someone as a matter of spiritual devotion. He thought himself pure even as he conspired against another. When he did the deed, he would stare up at the heavens and smile. He would think himself worthy of succor at some point. As he had performed a ritual another man would refuse to perform even as they coveted darkness' favor. Surely zealotry counted for something. Surely it set the zealot apart from mere devotees. If only because of the sacrifice such extremism implied.

Chances were, Sil'd have to whale on Bill Apple's head until he was in a more compliant frame of mind. A product of modern manufacturing, the book simply wasn't heavy or sharp enough in the manner

of some iron or steel rod. *That's San Francisco for you*, Sil Partridge thought. Even their damned garbage was effete. In Cleveland or Detroit, Sil believed, Bill Apple would have been dead before his head hit the pavement. Bear down hard with one of those twenty-pound bolts that's been removed from the side of a stamping machine, and it's lights out in perpetuity. Still, the weather out here was generally agreeable to Sil. He had no complaints.

Biff! Bam! Pow!

Subtly, the world shifted on its access. The only question for Sil was Apple's present intentions.

He had no idea what this red-bricked building had been or what it was in the midst of becoming. But Sil Partridge wasn't the inquisitive type. He looked at people as potential marks merely. As opposed to complex animals with motives of their own. And in this case quite literally he had failed to read the writing on an alley wall. This in the form of an old Kirby Manufacturing phantom ad from the 1950s:

Eternal Vacuums! "Kills Dirt Dead!"

Turn 22: Valknut

The humidor on Father's desk circa 1978 held nothing more than a series of ivory buttons, remnants of a beautiful shirt perhaps that were entirely forgotten. Or maybe the sewn-on eyes of a homemade doll long since condemned to ignominy or the trashcan after a fire.

"Look here, my man," Father said to Jonestown's new head of security Gerry Lane. He was holding up an ivory button. Here was a completely non-descript pathetic accoutrement to a casual observer. Father, on the other hand, was ever watchful, ever concerned about the shifting of the earth under his feet.

The button in question had two eyelets that seemed to Father like holes in a pale mask. Of Gerry Lane, Father wanted to know what message was being sent by the buttons' presence. He wanted to know if this button was supposed to represent a mask. Or was it a symbol intended as a warning from some agent of conspiracy? The mask was a death mask, perhaps. It was an omen, definitely. It told Father that his days in Guyana were numbered.

Something of that dreadful ilk.

"Now, you know me, sir," Father said to Gerry and wiped his forehead with the cotton handkerchief that was always with him of late. He felt the need to

keep up appearances in these trying times. He thought profuse sweating was supremely unbecoming in a man who had claimed the Godhead for himself. He thought any outward sign of perturbation or even physical discomfort was a dire weakness for a man in his position.

He needed to keep up appearances short term for the sake of his flock. Even now, Congressman Leo Ryan was wandering the grounds of Jonestown with an NBC television crew in tow. Father would be required to meet with the congressman if only to assuage any doubts concerning the voluntary nature of the Temple members' stay at Jonestown. Profuse sweating in the face of interrogation was a certain sign of guilt. When Ryan came to him, he wanted to be as composed as the skygod he had supplanted might be imagined to be always. He wanted to exude sanctity, which in his understanding was the same as omnipotence. He wanted to win a convert in Leo Ryan (if only as a convert to the understanding that he was too powerful to be deposed). He thought Congressman Ryan was a man capable of such understanding. According to Gerry Lane, Leo Ryan was measured and hesitant in his dealings with Temple members. He had the look of somebody who had the fear of God about him. He was somebody who could be molded to an image a sanctified man saw as pleasing. Somebody who, at least in the short term, was nobody to be worried about.

And in the long term we were all dead.

"Have a look for yourself," Father said to Gerry and handed the button over. It was sweaty from the secretions on Father's hand. There was no escaping the humidity of the jungle. And the handkerchief could only absorb so much sweat before it was rendered useless.

Gerry Lane held the button up to the room's lone light bulb for inspection. Then he turned it over and read the inscription in back: *Teufel -Hergestellt in Wien*, it said. He wondered if Father had read it. He wondered if he was accusing Gerry of something.

He wondered what Father found vexing about the object. He wondered if it was its twin unblinking eyelets staring at him accusatorily. Or maybe that it had gotten into his humidor in the first place.

The last cohiba Father had puffed on had been in 1977 shortly after relocating to Jonestown for good. He simply had run out and had been unable to contact Cuba for replacements. Probably they could have been shipped into Georgetown, but he had no way of ordering them out here. It had been months since he had opened the humidor. He found the buttons with German inscriptions staring up at him as a challenge.

Devil, it read. *Made in Vienna*.

Father was not a German-speaker. Nor certainly was he a willing interpreter of ephemera. Especially today of all days when he was so challenged, Father was not a willing interpreter of ephemera. He didn't know what he would do if Leo Ryan made a fuss. He had contingency plans, of course. But he didn't know what he was going to say to somebody who had the power to shut the compound down.

Father wasn't used to sucking hind titty, which was a favorite expression of many of his flock. On the other hand, simply barring Ryan's presence would likely cause the congressman to return in force at a later date. Father wanted to be left alone by AmeriKKKa. He had left it for good and he wanted what was best for his flock.

So, he had decided to take a middle path with the congressman. He wanted to reassure as he was bullying. Leo Ryan must surely know with whom he was dealing. On the other hand, he knew of the

enemy’s vast numbers. He knew Jonestown was fucked if it came down to a military standoff.

So he would meet with the congressman and calmly reassure him of several things: that all residents of Jonestown were free to leave (go and ask them yourself, sir!), and that the only criminal activity taking place in the compound was being executed by members of Ryan’s entourage who had entered private property in a foreign country and were presently violating that country’s laws concerning the possession of small caliber arms.

“Maybe I should direct him to the Chief of Constabulary out here,” Father said to Gerry momentarily forgetting the subject at hand. “What was it? What’s his name?”

Whenever Father asked a question, the tendency was to assume it was rhetorical. Thus, the strange pauses that were uniformly created afterward.

“St. Fleur,” Gerry said after fifteen seconds. “Oswald St. Fleur.”

Father could summon the Chief out to the jungle, but he wouldn’t arrive for at least a week. That’s the way it was in the Caribbean. Also, the compound was hardly in good standing with the local government. The members of the local government were AmeriKKKan puppets. Let ‘em rave on about their revolutionary Haitian forbearers all they wanted, but in Father’s eyes the Guyanese were house niggers. They did their massah’s will. They were devoid of nobility and honesty at once.

Lane could perhaps establish a radio communication with St. Fleur and Father could direct the conference anyway he wanted. But this was not what he wanted so he didn’t suggest it. He knew he wanted to intimidate Leo Ryan, not inform him. Obviously, the congressman did not give a shit about the local law. He would only care if an

international incident arose. Then the onus would be on him to establish why he had come down here.

Complaints from Temple family members stateside had roused this goody-two-shoes legislator into action. Leo Ryan had planned to fly out the next day. He hadn't communicated to Lane what action he would take once he left. Likely it was for him only to know. But he, like Father, had a haughty quality to him. Unlike Father, Leo was morally sane. He would not resort to violence to achieve the ends he sought.

But he was a congressman, on the other hand, a member of the most heinous government in the history of earth. Father would have been quick to point this out to his flock, that a violent revolutionary cell was the poor man's legislature, that an AK-47's manipulation was his veto and vote combined. Leo Ryan was "good" because he wasn't forced to be "bad." What use was democratic procedure in a society tainted by eternal evil and on the brink of self-annihilation?

"The red-faced fucker needs to be taken down a peg," had been Father's comment when he had been informed of the congressman's arrival in Guyana the other day.

He had contingency plans only. He thought he would play the whole thing by ear. He thought he could handle the like of Leo Ryan. He was after all the godhead. He thought he could control a petty official and his hangers-on.

There were defectors already, according to Gerry Lane, and Ryan had only been here an hour.

"Two that we know of," he told Father. "We caught one handing the congressman a note asking for help in leaving. But you can see a lot of workers milling about that want to approach him. They're following him at a distance," he said. "Probably won't make their move till he's near the plane then

they'll make a run for it. But we could, you know," he said wondering how to tell this to Father. "We have mechanisms for control for just such a situation."

In the humidor there were three other buttons. Each had a different color and size. They were at the box's bottom just by a residue left by the relic 0OOOOOOOOO. Neither detergent nor cloth scrubbing could remove the oily stain. As a matter of fact, the more one tried to scrub it the more pronounced it became.

"Where did they come from?" he asked Lane, declining to handle any of them. He thought the presence of a button implied the presence of a shirt (at least). But what shirt had he been in possession of that was presently in need of buttons? And if the buttons fell off, why weren't they re-sewn? It was an unnatural occurrence as far as Father could tell.

Therefore, there was some mystical message being sent. They were all dead masks with open space for eyes. They were there to relate the reality of Father's imminent demise. Now, this demise could either be honorable or humiliating. But the buttons with their empty eyelets were communicating to Father what must be. It was obviously of a piece with Ryan's arrival. The prophecy was that it would end badly for him. But it didn't specify by whose hand the final exit would be actuated.

How many days did Father have to live? He assumed at some point mass martyrdom would be required. The AmeriKKKan government was too domineering to simply let them be.

He thought it would occur years from now. This was when AmeriKKKa, knowing that the cold war was lost and socialism was on the march, would begin an invasion of the black and brown populous of South America.

“They’re a dying empire,” he had told Lane on many an occasion, “who by degrees will do what dying empires always do in its final stages. Which is to sustain itself through conquest. Eventually it, the invasion, will reach the lower Caribbean,” he had said. “At which point we’ll have to take decisive action. We have the rifles, and we have the cyanide. It is my dearest hope neither of these items will be necessary. But I don’t believe tragedy can be averted. I’ve looked into the eyes of the Great Beast too many times to know that conflict is inevitable. All our days are numbered precisely. And the decision has already been made by me to end our lives as heroes rather than slaves.”

Father could see that the moment of truth was nigh. Such a recognition had more to do with the buttons in the humidor than any foolish congressman’s “fact finding” in the Guyanese jungle.

To Father, the way forward was suddenly clear.

“Those who want to go should be allowed to go,” he said to Gerry Lane. “In fact, an announcement should be made in front of Ryan. You say over the PA ‘there’s no need to sneak around. You always were free to leave.’ Then what you do is pick an infiltrator or two to join the defectors. They will be armed, you will claim, as a good faith effort to deny that there is an ambush coming. But I don’t think it is beneficial to our cause to allow the plane to leave. Do I make myself clear?”

For this last point there was no translation needed for Gerry Lane.

Father asked, “How many are in the entourage?”

“Sixteen,” Lane told him. “And you can count on another twelve to fourteen defectors. I mean, we know who they are, obviously. We know about their falling productivity rates and the re-education they’ve already undergone.”

“OK,” said Father. “You figure a mass grave for thirty. And I’m assuming the plane’s pilot will be one of these.”

“He’s Guyanese,” Lane said. “He’s back with the plane. But” he said, “of course.”

“Of course,” Father said to Lane.

The plane must not be allowed to leave. In a way the decision had been made for Father. Jonestown members could dig a mass grave and stash the plane in the jungle. Which might give them several more weeks at least to form a response to the outside world. Who knew if the plane had been in radio contact with Georgetown since landing? A plane vanished in the great green desert of South America. It’s an unremarkable occurrence. Georgetown perhaps with AmeriKKKan assistance would send out a search party. Big deal. The jungle around here swallowed everything, given time. Housed in the rotting earth of the tropics, the slain bodies would decompose at four times the usual rate. The search party would find only bones at most. And if managed judiciously, the dentata were pulverized with a hammer, none of these would confirm the corpse’s identity.

Despite his fatalism, Father still experienced the will to remain alive. He began to ruminate on post-Ryan plans eventually. A post-Ryan plan was one that did not involve the cannister of cyanide powder sitting in a back room on the Jonestown warehouse like a dark vision of a monstrous worm. This image Father recalled from some occasion spent on the astral plane.

Somebody once had suggested an airlift of the Jonestown populous to the Soviet Union. But this had been judged impossible by Father long ago. His Soviet contacts had been growing increasingly disillusioned with him, for one. They viewed him as an unstable asset. And, now that he had left the

U.S., they saw his value as close to nothing. The Soviets wouldn't so much as meet with him now. On several occasions, they had refused his request to sell the Temple true military hardware such as the surface to air missiles Father felt was absolutely necessary in repelling a CIA-sponsored attack.

At best there would be a period of stalemate between Jonestown and outside authorities that would allow them to buy some true weaponry on the black market. Here they would make a final stand. Father wondered if the cyanide could be compressed into pill form and given to Temple soldiers with the directive that they should not be taken alive. They would go into battle with the pill between their teeth. Or perhaps it could be shoved into a metal capsule and released as a proliferation gas to take several Amerikkkans down with them. This was likely impossible given Jonestown's primitivistic set-up, but a man could dream. Father was the godhead. Perhaps he had the ability to promulgate supernatural change. He would meditate on it in the few hours a day he was not under the influence. He thought if any creature could affect such a change, it was him.

"I trust in my soldiers more than I trust in my own children," Father had said to Gerry Lane on more than one occasion. On this occasion he told him that his soldiers were the last bastion of integrity in this fallen world.

He thought they alone among Temple members would follow his orders to the letter. They would swallow the pill if it came to that. There would be no need for Kool-Aid and Valium to cut it with, like the other, weaker members.

The true revolutionary needs neither overseer nor dictate. This Father thought was a quote attributed to Che Guevara. Presently he saw its wisdom. He wondered if perchance he had chosen

unwisely when relocating the Church to Guyana. Here they were exposed to various CIA-sponsored malfeasance and fascistic maneuvering of the sort Leo Ryan was presently attempting. In San Francisco, there was tentative political support for Jonestown from the liberal establishment. There were radical lawyers and Hollywood apparatchiks at the ready with legal and financial support. Most importantly there was sympathetic media coverage that could be ginned up on a whim. This would work against, though not totally counter to, the fascist American government's homicidal dealings. In the jungle they were utterly at the mercy of the elements and the local authorities. He hadn't realized how isolated they had been until the Ryan trip. Up until then he had always seen their isolation as a strength. He had planned at some point a secession of Jonestown from Guyana. He had planned a campaign to lobby the U.N. for recognition of a nation state.

Father wished to separate himself and his flock completely from AmeriKKKa. Presently he saw this was impossible. Even in Antarctica, even on Mars likely, there would be Ryan-style "investigations" launched without the writ of law. In this life one was never allowed merely to co-exist. Leo Ryan likely would demand a Vietnam-style helicopter attack on Jonestown within days if he wasn't mollified. What legal right had there been for military intervention in a foreign country? Had Congress declared war against Jonestown? So many Temple members had already renounced their citizenship. What right did the fascist state up north have to attack unarmed civilians in another country?

Likely Congressman Ryan's lawyers and media puppets would compose the rationale ex post facto. They would claim the imminent danger of women and children as justification. Such had been William

Henry Harrison's justification for the genocide at Prophetstown, after all. No American soldier had ever slaughtered a native unjustly. Justice was as easily manipulated as the Yankee dollar. It was a half-starved ox yoked to the fascist state's plow.

He assumed there would be no need to get into the weeds of the situation. Nobody would dig too deeply after Father's politics were revealed. The average American dummy would say justice was done. They were the only ones that mattered, actually. They still had the power to vote. They still had the power to stop AmeriKKKa in its tracks, if only temporarily.

They had the power to overthrow an empire. You see, once slaves were given a taste of freedom it's hopeless to revoke the privilege. All parties concerned would have to come to an understanding at some point.

Father believed the key to surviving would be to stop Leo Ryan from getting back on the plane. For this task he had appointed Gerry Lane. He had no illusions about what it would take. He thought once the deed was done, they could meet again tomorrow and plan next steps.

'They try and take our children from us. What do they expect?" he said to Lane. "They'd do the same to us if the roles were reversed," he said. "I think there's little doubt about that."

Father trusted Gerry with such violent tasks. He understood the need to be above the fray personally.

"If the pilot's Guyanese, give him the option of walking away," Father mumbled. "You put a pistol to his head yourself and explain this to him. Act like you mean business. Explain where the jungle path is and how long it takes before reaching civilization. You take his ID and explain it to him. You tell him we know of your whereabouts. You tell him that we can

reach him at any time if need be if he goes to the authorities."

Gerry Lane nodded. Not for the first time was he struck by the magnitude of Father's insanity. Father was not just a little bit touched like the Biblical prophets of old. Rather, he was somebody in need of immediate psychiatric care. He would surely have to be put down like a rabid dog if he did not radically improve his frame of mind.

The buttons by the way were Gerry Lang's buttons. Or at least they were his buttons before Father had commandeered so many items of his clothing ten years ago once discovering they wore the same size.

He had liked the cut of cloth used by the Vienna tailors who had made these items.

"It's fine like a second skin," he had said of many of the silk items he had taken as a donation by Comrade Lang, now Lane. Gerry's shirts were of WWII vintage, inherited from Lang's dead headmaster father. But despite their exquisite construction, they held no sentimental value for him. The silk quite likely had in turn been "donated" by Jewish families prior to their deportation. The Reich he recalled liked to parade its triumphs. Gerry's father had likely committed some terrible crime against humanity to come upon those shirts. Silk was a necessary ingredient in the stormtrooper's parachutes, he thought. Even the Reich's generals would have had to sleep on ordinary cotton until the inevitable triumph of the will. He wouldn't have been surprised if human skin was their prime ingredient.

Father had taken to these shirts like a pig took to shit. Soon he was unaware that he had not bought them himself in some Indiana five-and-dime. The shirts themselves had not survived the move down here, but the buttons for some reason

survived. Now, here they were: an object of fixation for the People's Temple's head pastor. Perhaps they were cursed and affecting him on a metaphysical plane. More likely, they were the random idee fixe of a diseased brain.

In Gerry's estimation, Father couldn't be long for this world. As nature abhorred a lunatic. The world was fundamentally ordered (sane). And a truly insane person in it would disappear after a while.

He thought apart from killing Leo Ryan, Gerry's most pressing task was to save himself.

"We used them as rags to plug the tops of some bottles," Lane said to Father when suddenly, ex-nihilo, he recalled the Viennese shirt. The button had reminded Gerry of its presence belatedly and he was wondering if it was still available. Gerry had donated the shirt to the community without asking. As every piece of property every Temple member was currently in possession of was subject to community donation on a whim.

This might not have been true. He couldn't remember now. He had bigger fish to fry. He didn't give a damn, moreover.

If Father had sent him out to look for the shirt in addition to everything else that was on his plate, Gerry would tell him to stuff it. Yes, that's right. Father's security detail was right outside the door, but they were alone presently. He'd tell Father to stuff it and get his act together. Whenever Gerry grew angry his Austrian accent returned. *Ewe stuff eett!* He'd confront Father with evidence of his insanity and ask him to act on the evidence. Time was short. The one thing Father was right about was that Congressman Ryan's visit was a mortal threat to Jonestown. Gerry could certainly imagine a CIA-sponsored force of Guyanese driving up the jungle path within days. The word would be spread that Jim Jones was a Soviet apparatchik. It all depended on

what Leo Ryan had to say. A good or even neutral report would probably keep the CIA off their backs another year. But, based on initial observations, Gerry didn't see this happening. Leo Ryan had likely made up his mind before landing. The first defector was all that was required to harden his heart against Jonestown. Other than executing him, there was nothing to be done about Leo Ryan. He never should have been allowed entry.

"We'll all be groovy until it's time for him to leave," Lane told Larry Lovell, once they were both safely away in what was referred to as Gerry's "office." It was merely a plywood shack adjacent to Warehouse #1 that was already, less than nine months after it had been nailed together, showing signs of decomposition (you shouldn't build anything out of wood on the edge of the Amazon basin if you could help it). But despite all their zealotry, People's Temple members were complete strangers in this place. The jungle would have all of them once the CIA and the cyanide-spiked Kool-Aid were exhausted. So many of their buildings would need to be replaced within a few years. The horrid Worm God that Father served was nothing compared to the God of the Jungle. The Worm God would be eaten whole by the Amazon without a belch. In the jungle's rotten center so it was rumored a giant black hole was waiting.

Jonestown security had played a prank on Ryan's party when they had arrived in Georgetown. This was to threaten the lone good hotel in the Guyanese capital to deny them rooms.

"The first night they slept in the lobby," Larry, whose idea it was all along, had told Gerry when seeing the plane descend onto the temple airstrip. "And by the second night they began to realize that we meant motherfucking business. They saw what our reach is out here. That we were stronger than

the local government. And that they didn't bring nearly enough guns."

Instead of intimidating him, however, it only made Leo Ryan more resolute.

"He's a tough Irishman from some stateside shithole," Lane told Larry Lovell. "He likely took your prank as a challenge to his manhood," he said. "He's probably still riled up. He's judged us all already. And now he's just thinking out loud what it is he's going to do with us when he gets back to civilization."

Lane had already picked Larry to be the infiltrator amongst the defectors. It would be his job once the shooting started to make sure the plane did not take off. He should stride into the cockpit and shoot the pilot in the head. He should hide his pistol in the waistband of his jeans. He should tag along on the outside of the group to make sure nobody made him for the narc he was,

Temple members knew Larry Lovell as the meanest of the Temple security officers. Once the end came, he should be the person to avoid most.

"You'll need to make a good show of it, to breakdown in front of them and tell them everything that you actually saw," Lane said to Larry. "People know you and don't like you," he said. "They've already made you as a rat. You'll have to defend yourself in front of them and swear you just want to leave."

At some point they were going to need their entire armory. Lane thought Ryan's security and even the armed pilot could be brushed aside with no problem. He assumed the real violence would start with the appearance of so many attack helicopters above the tree line days later. Father's plan was ridiculous, Gerry thought. It would actuate the Temple's destruction. Leo Ryan obviously had come prepared. His security detail would have already

sent word to the U.S. consulate in Georgetown concerning their visit. Even a twelve-hour delay in their return would likely bring a militarized response. Father was unaware of the contempt his leftist organization had been held in by the Establishment. He had spent all these years in San Francisco being kowtowed to by local liberals in exchange for votes. This gave him the false impression that he had some political pull. He thought that Comrade Angela Davis or Comrade Huey Newton could and would organize effectively on the Temple's behalf in Washington.

The forces that were waiting for them in Georgetown would just assume shoot these two dead.

"I think our only chance is to hide in the jungle at the first sign of military movement," Gerry Lane said. Once there, Lord knew how any of them would survive. But Gerry supposed they would cross that bridge when they came to it. He had desert survival skills homed during his time with the French foreign legion. But the Amazon was another place utterly. One step into the bush and you became a potential meal for so many creatures that there was no accurate catalog of them.

Those who had chosen to live in this place willingly were interlopers, maniacs, foreigners. The sensible thing would be to make a run for it right now. But Father had other plans for them all.

The cyanide that he was about to retrieve from the warehouse sat at the center of his designs. If it had gone missing mysteriously, Jonestown would have had to be disbanded. It was the ultimate agent of population control. All Temple members had known it was there. They had been drilled on how to drink the Kool-Aid the cyanide would be mixed with. To Father, Kool-Aid drinking was the ultimate sign of love. He would just assume burn the compound

down and all those in it if a vat of it was not deployed on his say so.

For some time, Lane had known about the madness at the center of the People's Temple. Even now, he had been incapable of doing anything about it, of taking decisive action when common decency dictated it should be taken. For the longest time he had seen Father as a true father, a true God in the flesh capable of rolling back the tide of history. And, in a metaphorical way, of raising the dead.

"The decent thing to do would be to let us live," he said to himself when Larry Lovell was out of earshot. "But, then again, the decent thing to do would have been to stay in San Francisco."

Lane had been a Temple Member since the Ukiah days, since the days when fallout shelters were being constructed within the Temple basement in the Western Addition.

"Back then he was crazy. But his heart was pure," Lane said to a little girl he had never seen before on the warehouse's periphery. Frail as they all were nowadays, subsisting only on rations, the little girl seemed strangely robust to Gerry. Out in the sunlight she stared at Gerry as he checked his ring of keys. He was searching for the one that opened the sanctum sanctorum. This was totalitarianism's beating heart, the palace where the poison was kept. Or the guns, the electrodes, the nuclear codes or what have you. The place of ultimate control and terror, that is. Every repressive state worth its salt had such a sanctum sanctorum and this was Jonestown's. Without it, the repressive state would surely shrivel and die like a salt infiltrated leech. It was a place important enough to have its own mythos, to be dreamed of more than experienced. It became real as one entered its confines and checked its walls for soundness. As one maneuvered around the enormous webs of

giant jungle spiders therein, it gained self-consciousness. It was one of those Places That Must Be. It existed on multiple levels, both as nightmare figment and common perception. It was a remarkable experience to grow familiar enough with its contours to be able maneuver around inside it when it was entirely devoid of light. It rendered the remarkable banal. It made it seem that everything had happened already and was just being recalled in the flow of the present rather than the immutableness of the past.

The Nazis would have been mere Huns with Guns if it hadn't been for their crematoria. And the sprawling and brilliant Milky Way would be nowhere to be found without its sanctum sanctorum Thanatosis at its center as a negation to sprawl and brilliance.

Back in Ukiah, such an experienced place as this sanctum sanctorum would never even have been dreamed of by Gerry Lane. Gerry believed in Father deeply during those days, albeit hesitantly, just like so many others.

"We had civil defense drills every few days," he told the strange little girl who against Jonestown policy had walked inside the warehouse with him. Sensing the end was near, Gerry let her do as she wished. He thought her life would end very soon and was sorry for her. He thought maybe about telling her to run. But then he realized running would start a panic. And Father would see to it that he would be the first in line to drink.

In Ukiah there was paranoia but not cruelty. As paranoia was a tree and cruelty the flower that bloomed from it on a single spring day. Those days Father thought the Americans were going to drop the bomb any minute. He thought his flock would be safe in Ukiah several hundred miles from the nearest target. He thought the People's Temple

would be the foundation for a new society. He would of course be that the society's leader. He thought human salvation could only be gained through so much destruction. He was always exultant in those days when he talked about the end.

When the end didn't come, he turned bitter and inward. He moved the church back to San Francisco where it prospered. In a way.

"We doubled our membership in four years," he told her. "We saw all the flaws in the plan, but we prospered anyway. And you should have seen the fear in the establishment's eyes when Father came to call," he told her. "We had the ear of the powerful, certainly," he said. "If only when Father was strong. Eventually he grew weaker. So, we made plans to leave the country."

The turning point came for the People's Temple, he recalled, when Father attended a concert.

"A piano bar," Gerhard said to the little girl. "Is that what you call it here? I mean, there. In America."

The girl told him that, yes, this was what you call it.

Trying his best to recall the musician's name for her, Gerry hesitated in his labors.

"Robert," he said. "Ja? Robert Macomber?"

"Bobby McCann," the girl said plainly. Then with an imaginary crayon she began to draw on the wood wall. "He had Brylcreem in his hair," he said. "And he had the voice of an angel despite having a black soul."

"Your mother told you this, perhaps?" Gerhard said. "But yes, I remember now absolutely. And there was a particular song that did it. After which nothing was the same. The lyrics were chanted like an incantation. And you could read Father's face and read his despair. Somehow afterwards the world was clearer to him. And he set us all on a path of

destruction. As if he was laboring under a supreme spell:

I was a humdrum person
Leading a life apart
When love flew in through my window wide
And quickened my hum-drum heart
Love flew in through my window
I was so happy then
But after love had stayed a little while
Love flew out again

The cyanide powder was in a crate in the warehouse corner.

"What's this," Gerry said removing a white three-ring binder on top of it that had seemed unlike so much else in here to be dust free. He opened the front cover to read the title page:

The Book of Lehi
Being the Lost and One True Testament of the Prophet Transcribed from the Plates of Nephi Given to Joseph Smith by Moroni, 1823 A.D. Palmyra, New York

According to Father, Mormonism constituted the white man's last attempt to reserve God all for himself. Probably the book had to be smuggled in. Its presence was an act of defiance. Discipline would be administered to anyone who possessed it.

Gerry turned to the little girl holding up the binder.

"Is this yours?" he asked her.

"Everything's mine," she told him in German. He didn't understand either the response or the language in which the response was uttered. Had the People's Temple started recruiting on the

Continent at some point? Had her native language something to do with his?

According to the little girl, The *Book of Lehi* was the Mormons' "lost book" that contained the single true testament.

"Because it was true it had to be destroyed," she told Gerry and resumed her drawing. "It's obvious isn't it, that evil grows where the truth is missing," she said. "And so here it sits waiting to be read. But it will not be read, perhaps, by anyone but you, Herr Lang," she said. "But you see that is enough. The truth is like a communicable disease that requires but one carrier to create a contagion. And sometime over time the truth will out. But not in this place obviously," she said. "You realize everything that's about to take place. And common decency dictates that it transpire as quickly as possible. So, I'll leave you to your labors. Absent a child's fanciful questioning."

Soon the cyanide and the tablets of valium that one was supposed to dump into the Kool-Aid beforehand were on a dolly.

"*Was soll ich tun, Kind*?" Gerry Lane asked the girl. Though as promised no answer was proffered.

Gerry had a decision to make. He could bury the cyanide quickly out in the bush then make a run for the jungle path. Invariably Temple security would catch up to him and execute him Khmer Rouge-style with a blow to the back of the head (saved bullets). Except for God and the mysterious little girl, his act of heroism would go unsung. Leo Ryan and party by then would either be dead or dying. Word would never reach civilization. But once reduced to shooting comrades in the head or the face to assure their martyrdom there assuredly would be some survivors. Temple security would have to reload their semi-autos on occasion, for example. They would shoot and miss on occasion. Or only graze an

arm or leg. Nobody would want to die by gunshot wound. This was not what they signed up for. So some of them would inevitably r**EVULT** against Father's Word.

Morality spoke that this was the only ethical course to take. Also, it seemed that this was the little girl's expectation. This was why likely she appeared to him in the first place. She might have been an angel, here to provide moral guidance. Gerry disbelieved in such entities. But she might have been such an entity regardless. He didn't know the unvarnished truth. He had never partaken of the *Book of Lehi*:

O that cunning plan of the evil one! O the vainness, and the frailties,
and the foolish of men! When they are learned, they think they
are wise, and they hearken not unto the counsel of God, for they set
it aside, supposing they know of themselves.
Wherefore, their wisdom
if foolishness, and it profiteth them not.
Wherefore they shall perish.

The girl had made way for Gerry as he wheeled the dolly out.

Lane thought he could tote the thirty-pound drum of poison easily enough through the bush. Elsewise, he would have pushed it up the wood path that led straight to the pavilion. It didn't really matter which way as long as it reached its destination. Gerry Lane wasn't an evil man. But he had been conditioned over the years to obey. In this he was no different than all the other Kool-Aid drinkers. They knew they were committing a kind of sin by abnegating their free will, but they all acted robotically. Father was in their heads, if not their

hearts. They couldn't abide disobedience to him. It was more than fear of retribution. They felt it was a categorical imperative that they should obey. They felt somehow an enormous sinfulness had been indulged in when they decided to act as advocated by their own conscience.

If he disobeyed now, he realized he would be admitting a grievous error in judgment by joining the Temple in the first place.

"I can see the way you look at me," he said to the little girl "But you have to realize the way it was back then," he said. "Not just the 1960s in America, not only then I am talking about. I am talking about my past in Austria. By age nine they had me in the Hitler-*Jugend* marching around at odd hours. They used to march us past the Jewish ghetto that by then had been emptied out," he said. "My mother sent me to America in 1950 as if to outrun the family shame. And so, I came perhaps in search of new role models. I saw Jones in the early days as a parallel to Martin Luther King. That's who he reminded me of. And by the time it all turned rotten I found myself here staring into a mosquito net. So, what do you do, I ask? Abandon all your comrades to the clutches of a monster? My name is and always will be Gerhard Albert Lang. But whenever I was called this by others I jumped at their throats like a mad dog. Then, as now, I saw salvation as the problem. But in between bouts of despair, I did have faith in Reverend Jones. If only to believe in something. If only to keep myself from going crazy or thinking that nothing mattered. This weakness was my mistake all along."

Either by his own hand or some state executioner's, Father would expire. He was not the focus of Gerry's angst. In that history had forged others even worse than him. Hitler was worse than him, for example. Father was part of a continuum of

evil, a self-replicating worm whose individual segments were subordinate to the whole.

Evil was a Marxist commune where individual action was subordinate to group atrocity. The damnable impulse to follow was the disgusting black liniment between worm segments that acted as the creature's blood. Gerry Lane was not part of the worm but was a nutrient on which it fed. For this he was profoundly guilty. He knew that this was so.

"I am my own worst enemy," was how he put it to himself as he wheeled the dolly along. Passing the little girl on the way he noted with a curious dispassion that she was devoid of eyes. Lengths of red thread rather emerged from holes in the smooth skin over eye sockets. These were what marked the place of where the sense organs should be.

Presently he didn't find such features particularly unusual. Perhaps he was simply distracted by What Must Be. He noted this feature as one more deformity amongst so many deformities, physical and spiritual, that he had observed in Jonestown of late. He thought maybe she was one more lost soul, an orphan that Father would see to over the course of her life.

Father liked the wretched of the world because they didn't talk back. He had no purchase on morality. Not anymore. Rather, he liked to control. And mass suicide was the ultimate form of control. It produced a great amount of black liniment for the worm. Look what he was about to make so many people of sound mind and body do! This, be assured, was a truly godly achievement. And once a man became as God, he was free to die. He would look at all the ululating bodies choking up their own vomit and recall himself as serene. Then he would put a pistol to his head and pull the trigger.

Gerry balanced the valium packs on the cyanide drum as he wheeled the dolly. In the distance from

the direction of the airstrip he could hear sporadic gunfire. Probably in another three hours or so a gathering would be called to the pavilion.

Temple security would need to return first. Their wounds would need to be tended. They would need to be in place when the first Kool-Aid cups were handed out. They would have orders to shoot any stragglers. They would collect those who ran and shoot them. Such brutality would focus the minds of those in the Kool-Aid line. Over the PA, Father would sell them on the reality that there was no escape. Most of them would be like Gerry and do as they were told. That's what happened in times of extreme duress. Gerry as Gerhard had seen it himself on many an occasion while outside the gates of Mauthausen. At the time he merely thought the victims were mentally weak, but in fact they were afraid. Their decision-making faculties had shut down. They likely couldn't be compelled to even say their own name.

As he wheeled the dolly into green jungle light, Gerhard watched the girl's silent approach.

"It's all for the best," she told him in German. "it's what has to be."

Gerry turned and asked her why.

"The lord of the universe wills that it be so," she said calmly. "He sees what you have done and smiles on you. But for Him there is no difference between a blessing and a curse. Better to defy Him than worship in his presence, therefore. Just as it's better to love than hate, knowing in advance they're both futile acts."

The girl supposed that in another reality it might not be so. Then again, this reality was the one reality all sentient beings were trapped in. And there was one God who held dominion over it, Thanatosis!

“You will fall into his belly and be devoured,” she said. “At which point you can ask all your insipid questions of him.” The girl with the threads in her eyes began to play hopscotch on an invisible grid. Hard to say with her absence of eyes how she had managed to hit the squares. This too Lang found only slightly mysterious. In the cyanide’s presence, he had been transformed into a pack mule. Except for the black hole, God, he didn’t ask questions of anybody at all.

Though the announcement to gather had not yet been broadcast, so many Temple members seemed to realize something was in the air.

“I don’t know and wouldn’t tell ya if I did,” Gerry said to several children who had the naivete to draw near him. He was telling the God’s honest truth that he did not know what the skull-and-crossbones markings on the poison meant. To them it seemed like a pirate insignia. Perhaps it was meant to be joyful. They didn’t teach the kids so well in the Temple school. Most lessons were about Father.

The rag covering up the cyanide opening was crimson-colored.

“Yonder what ya doing anyway?” Mr. Hosea Miller, one of the nameless unfortunates whose life history Lang would never know asked him as the white poison was made ready. The green death’s head bottle of absinthe, store bought in Georgetown and discarded by Ryan’s party, was lately making the rounds of those assembled. Lang took it when it was offered then smashed it on the ground. Then he placed the crimson cloth over the mess and looked.

A black heart was there, still in need of a key. And now he had so many keys on his chain.

Hosea asked Gerry with desperation in his voice: “How bout one of them? Surely?”

The bubblegum Hosea Miller was chewing was Grape Hubba-Bubba. Once Gerry Lang smelled it, it

shocked him. He had been to this spot an infinite number of times in his life apparently. There was nothing new here. As to quote the Sage of Calcutta, D.R. Kamakar:

The most painful state of being is remembering the future, particularly the one you'll never have.

Gerry only got halfway through trying his keys out when Father and three security thugs approached. Now he was fucked. He knew it absolutely.

He jumped off the podium and ran. Somebody ran after him.

Ten yards into the tree line was an electrified fence. He leaped over it and continued to run for it. He thought at any moment he would be shot. For the remainder of his days, he was not entirely sure that he had not been shot. No, there are so many worse things than dying. Ask poor Hosea Miller back there in Father’s clutches. He would be the first of the men to die. Up until the time he started to choke he would consider it some sort of high honor.

The End

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About the Author

David Miller is the author of *Little Ethiopia*, *Death Trip*, *Gut Bucket Blues, and Busy Bee*. This is his eleventh novel. There is little you don’t know about him that he doesn’t know about himself.